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AUROR

VAMPIRE

BOOKS 1-3 & NOVELLA

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SUMMARY

If there is one thing eighteen-year-old Aurora Sky wants, it's to get off the iceberg she calls home. Being kissed before she graduates wouldn't hurt either.

Then a near-fatal car wreck changes everything. Government agents step in and save Aurora's life in exchange for her services as a vampire hunter. In Alaska. Basically she's a glorified chew toy. All thanks to her rare blood type, which sends a vampire into temporary paralysis right before she has to finish the job... by hand.

Now Aurora's only friends are groupies of the undead and the only boy she can think about may very well be a vampire.

Book 1 of 6

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1
Life Ends On A Curse

I was outnumbered six to one… at least that's how it felt.

My supposed teammates stood by uselessly as the volleyball hurtled over the net and whopped me in the shoulder.

The beautiful Brooke Harris high fived the boy beside her before switching corners. It didn't matter if she served from the right or the left. The ball flew at me—again.

I ground my teeth together and tried to pelt the ball back, but launched it into the net instead. God, I sucked at team sports.

"Come on, Aurora!" Clayton Wilcox snapped beside me.

I grimaced. A junior the size of Napoleon shouldn't be speaking to a senior that way, but that was just my opinion.

One of my teammates bent down for the ball and tossed it back to Brooke, who smiled as though auditioning for a teeth whitening ad. Brooke served again, and the volleyball sailed over the net once more—toward me, of course.

Clayton's patience had apparently worn out. He stepped in and bumped into me, but managed to smack the ball back. Fine. Whatever. My teammates should get in the game.

Behind Brooke and her team of Olympians the bleacher crowd slouched against the benches like sloths while the rest of us got wrist burns. I'd tried everything from flu symptoms to a twisted ankle to get out of participating, but Mr. Mooney saw me as an active member of the student body, unlike the loafers who regularly got out of gym.

Fane Donado and Valerie Ward, the reigning king and queen of gym exemption, seemed to believe that making out substituted for physical ed.

Valerie was gorgeous, in a classical sixteenth century courtesan sort of way. Curves graced her hips and hair, which fell in thick waves of strawberry-brown down her back.

Fane had The Worst Hair: ink black and buzzed on the sides with a mass of blond on top. Combing it back was a big mistake. It drew further attention to his long forehead and wide set eyes. He had one of those disastrous looks that captured my attention—like Edward Scissorhands.

Every day Fane dressed in head to toe black and a long leather jacket which he wore at all times, like a second skin. Maybe he was packing…or dealing. Neither would surprise me.

I usually had a thing for tall, skinny guys, but I made exceptions, especially when the guy in question had trouble keeping his tongue inside his own mouth.

I wanted my first kiss to be a pleasant experience, not pornographic.

Mr. Mooney's whistle announced the end of gym at the same time Brooke slammed the ball over. This one hit me in the chest.

"Ow!"

I know guys are sensitive between the legs, but a woman's breasts aren't exactly made out of sponge cake.

My classmates pattered across the gym floor toward the locker rooms. The bleacher crowd rose slowly and stretched their arms.

Yeah, try not to exert yourselves or anything.

I leaned down for the volleyball and walked it over to the roll out cart. As I nestled the ball into place, three more toppled off and rolled in opposite directions.

Groan. I spent enough time chasing balls around during gym, never mind running after them when I needed to change and book it to Algebra II.

By the time I retrieved each ball and set them on the cart, everyone had cleared out of the locker room, leaving hairspray fumes in their wake. *Gag*. My hair tumbled down my back as I freed it from its ponytail.

As I yanked the zipper up my jeans I heard a snicker and stopped. All was quiet and then I heard it again. Resisting the urge to call out a feeble "Hello?" I finished securing my pants then rounded a wall of lockers.

Valerie straddled Fane on the locker room bench in her corset top and black lace-up boots. Her arms circled his neck.

As she leaned back to look at me, Fane's face emerged.

I would not blush. Not in front of Fane Donado. Too late. My cheeks flamed rouge.

From this close up I could see that among Fane's aforementioned defects, his lips were mismatched; the top one smaller than the bottom.

Those lips curled back as Fane took note of my presence. I swear I heard him make a sound of disgust from deep within his throat, like I'd crashed a private party or barged into their hotel suite.

I stood staring like an idiot waiting to be dismissed.

When our eyes met, Fane smiled. Not a friendly 'hello' smile or the cute 'you caught me in the act' kind. Eyes locked on mine, Fane ran the tip of his tongue along his upper lip.

The lewd gesture made me feel somehow involved in their foreplay.

My mouth went dry.

Fane cocked a dark brow. "See something interesting?"

I should have squared my shoulders and informed him, "No, not at all" or "Yeah, I find it interesting that there's a boy in the girls' locker room. So you had that sex operation, did you?"

Instead, I turned and fled.

I didn't have time for comebacks.

If I hurried maybe I could still catch my friend Denise at our hall lockers before she left for math.

As I speed walked toward my locker, a football whooshed across the

hall, barely missing my shoulder. *Again?* I glared at the boy who had chucked it to his friend. He laughed and said, "Whoops."

God, I couldn't wait to graduate and get the hell out of Alaska and Denali High School.

Sure enough, when I reached my locker, Denise had long since departed. I did a quick book and binder grab, then sprinted to math. The warning bell rang as I hurried in and took my seat beside my friend. She already had her book open and pencil in motion on notepaper.

Denise used to laugh at my gym recaps. Now she didn't even inquire after my lateness and here I was dying to tell her about the sex show in the locker room. Okay, not exactly a sex show, but practically!

"Hey, Denise," I said. "You'll never believe what happened after gym."

Denise's eyes narrowed as though I had interrupted her in the middle of a pop quiz.

I hesitated for a second. Then the words tumbled out. "Remember that guy I told you about in gym…"

Denise stopped me before I could go any further. "Can this wait until lunch?"

Suddenly I felt stupid with my mouth hanging half open seeing as my closest friend pretty much told me to shut up.

All part of Denise's new attitude "un-makeover" starting the day Notre Dame accepted me while her own first choice college, Carleton, had turned her down.

She wasn't the only student at Denali High with senioritis.

Mom warned me this would happen. Friends began focusing on finishing senior year and imagining their lives in that great place beyond: College.

Guilty as charged.

If it were up to me, I wouldn't be puzzling over an algebra graph, I'd already be enrolled at Notre Dame, set up in my dorm, attending class.

That's the thing about universities—they wanted you to finish high school first.

After eighteen years in Anchorage I could hardly wait to trade in snow and cold for civilization.

Until then, six more months before graduation.

At the end of the hour, Denise said an abrupt, "See you at lunch."

Well, she could forget about juicy details 'cause I wasn't dishing. Bitchy behavior deserved no rewards. Maybe Tracey Rowen in third period French would appreciate the story.

At least I wasn't running late for French because in about three seconds, Scott Stevens would pass me in the hall.

Speaking of juicy delights.

I swore he moved in slow motion when he rounded the corner.

Scott had the thin, towering build going for him. He didn't wear a letterman jacket, which he could have as captain of the basketball team, but

Scott was the kind of guy who had his own killer style. Best of all, he looked me in the eyes and smiled whenever he saw me. And that is why I, Aurora Sky, for the first time in my life, had a major crush on a jock.

Too bad he and Emily Horton were an item.

"Hi, Aurora."

"Hey, Scott."

After he passed, I ducked into the girl's bathroom at the end of the hall. A group of juniors huddled together and leaned into the mirror as they applied makeup. They'd all dyed their hair jet black with varying streaks of colors, as if to help tell each other apart. One had blond streaks, one red, and another blue.

The girls moved several inches to give me room. When I looked in the mirror, I tried to recreate the same smile I'd flashed Scott. My lips curved over a set of straight teeth. I pulled my hair over my shoulders. That would have looked better, but I always pushed it out of the way.

The group beside me finished their faces and lips. The girl with the blue streaks rubbed concealer with two fingers over a massive hickey on her neck.

As I headed out, the warning bell rang.

At the end of the day, Denise started spinning the combo on her locker at the same time as me. I got distracted and had to start over.

Once she had her coat on, Denise shut her locker with a *thud*.

"See you later," she said, hoisting her backpack over one shoulder

So now she couldn't wait to walk out to our cars together?

Okay then.

I zipped up my jacket a minute later and headed for the student parking lot alone. The moisture on my lashes froze as soon as I stepped outside. Exhaust from idling cars hovered in the stagnant air. Not only was this time of year cold and dark, it turned my stomach inside out.

Once the car stuttered to life, I smacked my mittens together to keep from freezing solid and let the vents do their work unthawing the windshield. After the ice turned to droplets, I swiped the windshield with the wipers. They carved a porthole into the glass and grated against the coarse outer layers of ice.

The roads hadn't thawed, not even with the blast of exhaust pipes and friction of tires running across the polished ice all day. Tires spun in the parking lot. The truck in front of me gunned it and slid sideways onto the road.

College couldn't come soon enough.

I turned the radio on and sung along softly to the lyrics as I passed mounds of snow that had melted during a warm spell the previous week. This week they'd refrozen into white misshapen humps over the landscape.

My tires skidded at the first red stoplight. I slid forward four inches. Getting started again took a moment. Too much gas and my tires spun in place.

Once I lived on campus at Notre Dame there would be no more playing slip and slide on the streets. I planned to walk everywhere on solid pavement.

I passed the fast food chains lining the road just blocks from Denali High. On the long straight stretch home I drove on autopilot until business centers turned to neighborhoods. Small gaps of forest arched over the sides of the road. I was almost home when I took the sharpest curve on Jewel Lake Road.

As I rounded the corner a SUV appeared in front of me, speeding around the bend. The car made a horrible skidding sound before sliding into my lane.

Time inched forward.

Tires screeched. I braked, but the car slid out from under me. Light glinted off the SUV's front windshield, and for a moment, I saw the driver—a boy wearing a blue bandana around his forehead. Maybe I would have found him cute if he weren't about to kill us both.

In seconds, he would hit me. And I couldn't do anything. I couldn't brake. I couldn't dodge him. This was it.

I saw the boy's face. I read his lips. "Oh, shit."

We said the words together.

In the event of a catastrophe, one thing is sure. Your life ends on a curse.

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2
Terms of Revival

Sound returned first. A gurney trundled over the floor. Parchment fluttered. The scratch of pen on paper thundered in my ear, as though someone held a microphone to the tip as they wrote.

Later I heard voices and a horrible metallic scraping. Even with eyes closed, the lights glared. The brightness penetrated my eyelids straight to the space in front of my brain. Static pinpricks of light moved inside my forehead.

Someone wheeled something over. It got closer and closer.

A smooth voice said, "Find me the moment she starts to come around."

Then sound left the room like fire sucking oxygen from a burning building. For a while there was nothing, not even the static in my mind. And then the first traces of feeling returned.

Blood rushed through my veins. My heart began a steady pump. My eyes fluttered. I balled my toes up and released them. The thin bones in my hand moved under my skin like hammers connected to piano keys as my fingers twitched over the sheet.

"How are you feeling, Aurora?"

I lowered my chin and got my first glimpse of the face behind the voice. He was a young man, cleanly shaven, wearing a gray suit.

When our eyes met he smiled. "I am Agent Melcher. Welcome back."

My voice croaked the moment I opened my mouth. "Where am I?"

"You're on Elmendorf Air Force Base and this…" Melcher said looking around the bright enclosure "is our unit's own private ER."

It made sense that I would be in a hospital, but why on base? My family had no ties to the armed forces. Dad was out of the country surveying, but where was Mom?

"What happened?"

"You were in a car accident. Do you remember?"

Of course I remembered. How could I ever forget the last seconds of my life? Or what I thought were the last seconds.

"The other driver…" I couldn't finish the sentence.

"Is gone," Melcher answered.

Suddenly the steady smile on his lips was too much. I looked at the door beyond his shoulder.

"Don't worry, Aurora. We've taken care of everything—the surgery and organ transplants. Thanks to the blood transfusion we performed your bones are healing quickly. You'll be better than new in no time."

The smile in his voice made me distrust him at once.

"Why am I here?"

"Because you have very special blood, Aurora."

No one ever referred to my blood as special. Doctors called it unique and rare —the rarest of all blood types. Less than one percent of the population had AB negative blood. Maybe that's why I was on base. Maybe the government had the only supply of AB negative for my blood transfusion. But why would they help me?

I looked at Melcher for further explanation, but he kept smiling and said, "I'll send in your mother now."

Melcher's calm, calculating tone was replaced by my Mom's own hysterical outburst as she flew into the room. "Oh, my God! Aurora! Thank God! Thank God!" She grasped me by the shoulders and lowered herself over my chest, pressing me into the bed. She pulled back. Tears streaked her cheeks. "Thank God," she said again. "My baby. It's a miracle."

She dabbed at her eyes with a tissue. "How are you feeling?"

I squinted at her. "Why am I on base?"

Mom's face screwed up funny and it looked like she might start crying again. Then she took a deep breath and returned to patting my hand.

"You look like you're feeling much better," she answered for me. "Agent Melcher said I can take you home in another week."

The agent, not the doctor.

"How long have I been here?"

"Two weeks…"

"Two weeks!" I cried.

Tears started pooling in Mom's eyes once more. "They had to put you in a medically induced coma."

My eyes darted around the room frantically looking for a clock or a calendar —a window even. "What month is it?"

Mom hesitated before answering, "December."

"But my exams. My assignments."

Notre Dame might have accepted me, but that didn't mean jack if I didn't graduate.

"I spoke to all your teachers and they're giving you extensions. You'll be able to go to school the week before Christmas then use the holiday break to catch up."

Mom placed a hand on my face. "Don't worry. Just rest and we'll get you home."

My stomach twisted into knots. Going home meant getting in a car and I was never getting into another moving vehicle as long as I lived.

I'd just have to walk back —all fourteen miles.

A young man in a white lab coat and crew cut burst into my room early the next morning. I pulled my bed sheet instinctively against my chest.

"Alright, Aurora, up and at 'em."

The possibility of a car waiting outside made me wince. “Where am I going?”

“Not far…next door.”

“What’s next door?”

“The treadmill. It’s time to start physical therapy.”

I waited for him to laugh and say he was joking; he really needed to take my blood pressure and check my vitals. But he frowned when I didn’t leap out of bed and do something peppy, like a hundred jumping jacks.

“Um, I just woke up from a coma yesterday, and it sounds like I had some pretty major surgery.”

If there was ever a reason to get out of physical anything, surviving a head on collision should rank top.

“Yes, but you have special blood.”

I was starting to think it was mutant blood the way everyone talked about it in this place.

Physical therapy guy nodded at a neatly folded stack of clothing on the chair beside my bed. “I’ll wait in the hall while you get dressed. You have five minutes.”

Five minutes, I grumbled after he left. I was no doctor, but this wasn’t how you treated trauma patients. I peeled the sheet aside and took a tentative first step onto the cold linoleum floor. My hand gripped the mattress in case I was unable to hold up my own weight, but I felt sturdy once I got the second foot down.

After removing the hospital gown, I glimpsed a first look at my body. A line of stitches zipped up my chest over a four-inch scar. *Nice*. At least nothing was crushed beyond repair. My legs and arms weren’t even bruised. That only left my face.

I put on the gray sweatpants and army green T-shirt then entered the room’s corner bathroom. My fingers trembled over the light switch. *Deep breath*. I flicked it on.

All that anticipation just to end up face to face with…a blank wall. Seriously? Why not install a sink without a faucet while they were at it? Or maybe my face was so disfigured they’d removed the mirror altogether.

I refused to believe it. Mom would have shown signs of distress when she kissed my forehead.

Pound,pound,pound. My therapist wasn’t kidding about the five minutes.

“Time’s up, Aurora.”

At the end of the week, Melcher walked into my room with a woman who looked to be, like him, in her early thirties.

“Aurora, this is my partner, Agent Crist.”

Crist nodded curtly. She wore a frown as tight as the pony tail at the nape

of her neck. In their matching suits, she and Melcher looked like missionaries.

They walked over to where I sat in the room's only chair and stood on either side of me, forcing my eyes to ping pong between them.

"How's therapy going?" Melcher asked.

I glared at him. "Is that what you call this, 'cause I feel like I'm training for a marathon?"

Usually I liked making people laugh. Not so with Melcher. His chuckle grated on my nerves. Agent Crist pursed her lips.

"We needed to make sure you were fully functional," Melcher said.

"I'd say walking eight miles a day is functional enough." I could have been half way home that very morning. Then there was the running my therapist threw in at the end of our sessions: one mile the first few days and now he had me pounding out two.

They should call this shock therapy.

"Well, I have good news. We're releasing you…for now. But before you go, Agent Crist and I would like to go over the terms of your revival."

I eyed Melcher suspiciously.

"You have been saved for a specific purpose—a chance to serve not only your country, but mankind."

I don't think so. The air force or military or whoever the agents represented must be desperate if they had to abduct teenage girls from accident scenes by way of recruitment.

Melcher gestured with his right hand as he spoke. "As I mentioned, you have a very special blood type and this blood, when injected with the right combination of modified organisms and viruses, makes you a deadly and powerful force against the demonic beings that plague this earth."

Maybe I should have focused on the demonic beings part, but when my lips flew open I could only think of one thing. "You injected me with a virus!"

Melcher leaned in closer. "You have nothing to fear, Aurora. The virus won't harm you so long as you take your monthly injection."

"Monthly injection! Like a shot? For how long?" When Melcher didn't answer a horrifying thought occurred to me. "For the rest of my life?"

"It's not that bad, we've already administered your first dose," Crist said.

I kept my eyes on Melcher. Something told me he was the one running the show. "Not that bad?" I repeated. "Why infect me with a virus in the first place?"

Melcher listened with patience. I was beginning to wonder if he ever frowned or if he was like one of those scary clown dolls with a perpetual smile stretched across its face.

"Think of it as a vaccination. Like a flu shot." Melcher formed a steeple with his fingers. "As a field agent you will come into contact with all kinds of infected *individuals*. We do this for your own protection."

"What do you mean field agent?"

"We'll go over that during orientation." Melcher stepped forward.

Suddenly he was looming over me. “Do not doubt, Aurora, that evil is among us. It threatens our way of life. Candidates such as you are instrumental in keeping not only our country safe, but humanity itself. This is an opportunity to serve the greater good.” Melcher turned to Crist. “Have I left anything out?”

“Yes,” Crist said. Her eyes zeroed in on me. “You have no choice.”

Melcher cleared his throat. “What Agent Crist means to say is that your mother, as your legal guardian, has signed your rights over to us. We have saved your life and you, in turn, will save the lives of hundreds.” Melcher stepped closer. “You were an extremely expensive investment, Aurora. A new heart, kidney, and lungs—I think that was a record, don’t you, Agent Crist? If we’d had to replace any more organs we may’ve had our very first Frankenstein on the team.”

I resisted the urge to itch the stitches under my shirt.

Crist still had me in her glare. “Most girls in your shoes would have ended up as organ donors rather than receivers,” she said.

“That’s right,” Melcher said. “Still had a healthy spleen and liver up for grabs.” Again that smile. “Do you have any questions so far?”

I stood up. “Just one. When is my mom picking me up?”

Melcher and Crist shared a look.

“She’s in shock,” Crist said.

“She’ll come around.” Melcher turned to me. “Your mother will be here in an hour.”

My face relaxed. Fine, I’d get in a car one last time. Just to get out of there.

“We’ll see you again soon,” Melcher said, before he and Crist left the room.

Not if I could help it.

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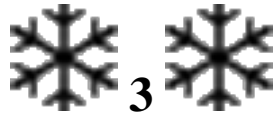

3
Team Fane

The face in the mirror had no eyes or lips. She was blurry, distorted. Every time I tried to look at her I had to look away. It was better not to tell Mom I was hallucinating. She was worried enough.

Maybe I was sick. *Viruses*. Melcher had used the plural.

Why would the agents save my life then make me sick?

Why would the agents save me at all?

I didn't feel sick. I didn't feel anything.

"Aurora!" Mom called from downstairs. "You're going to miss the bus if you don't leave soon."

I took each stair carefully. Didn't want to risk re-breaking any bones. It hardly seemed possible that they had healed so quickly to begin with. Rather than tell me to relax and take it easy, my doctor had told me to get plenty of exercise.

My foot hit the tiled entryway.

"Are you sure I can't give you a ride to school?" Mom asked. "I'd like to."

"I'd rather take the bus."

"Can I pick you up?"

"No."

I zipped my backpack closed. She grabbed a white quilted parka from the closet and held it up, waiting for me to slip it on.

I stared at it. "Whose coat is that?"

"I got it for you. Don't you like it?"

I liked my bomber jacket better, but it hadn't made it through the wreck.

I slipped my arms into the coat sleeves without comment and pulled on my winter boots. Mom lifted the hood over my head as I moved to the front door.

"Have a good day. Call me if you decide you want a ride home."

I nodded and walked into the fresh air, for once welcoming the cold prickle across my face. I'd been indoors for weeks. A dusting of snow covered the neighbors' roofs and lawns. The driveways were clear. I averted my eyes when passing the empty spot next to the garage where my car should have been parked.

The lowerclassman waiting at the bottom of the hill glanced at me when I came to a stop several paces away from the cluster they'd formed.

I felt like I'd stumbled backwards in time to a bygone era—one in which I waited at the end of the street for the school bus.

Early morning commuters chugged past in their cars. The yellow bus came along eventually, its chains rattling around the rotating tires, and ground

to a halt. I let everyone else board before I climbed the stairs.

I took one step down the aisle and stopped. The smell overwhelmed me: hairspray and perfume, BO and foul breath, all intertwined—thirty-eight bodies crammed inside a tin can. My head spun. I grabbed hold of a seatback to steady myself.

I resisted the urge to back up and climb back down the stairs. But I'd had enough of wasting away in square rooms. I slid into the first available spot and stared out the window. At least the movement didn't bother me. I felt like I was in a submarine gliding smoothly through a current.

Denise waited until I walked all the way up to our lockers to give me a hug. "Welcome back! I wanted to visit you in the hospital, but your mom said they were only allowing family members. How are you feeling?"

"Fine."

The halls were filled with chatter—the volume much too loud. I winced as a locker slammed shut beside me.

"Well, you look great," Denise told me, head in her locker as she spoke.

"Thanks."

Students stared at me and whispered quickly as they passed our lockers.

AJ, Denali High's ultimate player, strode over. His sneakers squeaked when he stopped in front of us. He looked me up and down. "Hey, Aurora, I heard you were in a coma."

"Leave her alone!" Denise snapped.

"Just askin'," AJ said with a shrug before moving on.

"I'm sure the last thing you want to do is talk about it," Denise said.

Her meaning was clear. Denise didn't want to hear a word about the accident.

I didn't want to talk about it anyway.

Denise pulled a three ringed binder out of her locker and stuffed it inside her backpack. "I'm so glad you're all right. Can I help you with anything?"

"I'm fine…thanks," I repeated.

"Okay. See you in math."

Yeah, okay.

At least now I had an excuse to get out of gym. Even better, Scott Stevens spoke more than two words to me.

That afternoon, "Hi, Aurora," was followed by, "Nice to have you back."

My own friend had failed to say those words. I liked hearing it from Scott better anyway. It came with a smile.

Volleyball had been replaced by badminton while I was gone. Mr. Mooney let me get away with sitting out class the first two days, but by the third he decided to diagnose me as fit for participation.

"Sky, ready to jump back in?"

I paused on my way to the bleachers. "I'm not dressed."

Besides, everyone was already paired up.

"Fane!" Mr. Mooney called. "Get out here. You can be Aurora's partner."

I tried not to flinch or show signs of distress. My last memory of Fane involved his tongue tracing his upper lip.

Fane stood up and gave Mr. Mooney a glare so dark it sent a shiver down my spine. It was the first real sensation I'd experienced since the accident. When his eyes moved to me I momentarily forgot to breathe.

Fane held my gaze a moment longer then slipped out of his leather jacket. I watched, transfixed. This was history in the making. Fane Donado taking off his coat.

All of his imperfections breezed out the door as soon as I got my first look at the six-pack straining against his cotton tee. My eyes must have been playing tricks on me. For a guy with such a slender build, Fane was surprisingly muscled.

Fane took deliberate steps down the aisle of the bench, straight to the edge. He jumped from the bleachers, causing them to rock in his wake.

I swore I felt a *'thud'* inside the pit of my stomach when he landed.

Mr. Mooney nodded at Fane. "You two are playing Clayton and Tyler."

Fane walked past me and took two rackets off the floor. He handed me one. I took it from his outstretched hand then followed several steps behind.

Part of me was relieved he didn't say anything. All I could think about was the obscene gesture he'd made right before my world turned up-side-down. I hardly noticed the hair now. I was too distracted by his lips. And now his abs. Luckily, I wouldn't have to look at either while we played side by side.

At the far court, Clayton and Tyler bounced birdies up and down on the strings of their rackets.

Clayton nudged Tyler as we approached. "Oh great. Goth boy and zombie girl. This should be fun."

I took my place beside Fane. He held his racket loose and lazy. I barely held mine at all. Clayton pelted the birdie at me. I tried to shield my face and ended up dropping my racket.

"Oh, come on!" Clayton shouted.

I picked up the birdie and threw it over the net.

Clayton served the birdie to Fane, who smacked it over the net with the flick of a wrist. Tyler launched the birdie at me. It hit me on the shoulder, but I swung anyway as it bounced to the floor.

"Hello? Earth to Aurora," Tyler called across the net.

"I think she's still in a coma," Clayton said.

"That's game," Tyler said. "Your serve."

I picked up the birdie and handed it to Fane. It's a good thing it wasn't a real bird. Fane crushed it in his hand. Only for a moment. Only I saw. He relaxed and looked across the net. I felt that odd shiver return.

Fane smacked the birdie as though it were a fly. He walloped it right between Tyler and Clayton so fast neither boy had time to react. When they did manage a return hit, Fane gracefully flicked away any stray birds that came at me. I watched in fascination, fully engaged for the first time since the accident.

The boys tried to hit the birdie back. Fane had them racing across every corner of their court. By the end of the period they were out of breath. They took off without a backwards glance when Mr. Mooney blew his whistle signaling the end of gym.

As I walked past Fane I felt a twitch. Not my own. I felt the twitch of his hand wanting to stop me.

"Hey, you. Are you okay?"

If I had my full range of emotions left I'd laugh. He didn't even know my name—that or it wasn't worth saying.

He studied me carefully. "I've seen that look before."

Now I was curious.

Valerie jumped down from the bleachers. "Fane!"

He didn't pay attention to her. I held my breath waiting for him to tell me what he saw.

Valerie sashayed her way over to Fane. She held out his jacket. "I'm ready to blow this joint. Let's get a bite."

Her last words grabbed his attention, and he forgot me completely. Valerie looped her arm around Fane's and they walked toward the double doors. I was right behind them, silent as a ghost. When I reached the hall entrance leading to the locker rooms I stopped. I saw his head start to turn. I knew he was going to look back, but by the time he did I'd be gone.

I heard the Christmas music and smelled molasses before I walked through the door. "Jingle Bells" jangled inside my ears the moment I crossed the threshold. Mom was in the kitchen amidst trays of cut-out cookies. She bit into a gingerbread man as I walked in. She turned, crumbs falling from her mouth, swallowed, and smiled.

"I was feeling festive today," she said.

I glanced at the dining room table, where she'd set out plates of sugar cookies shaped like angels and stars; bowls of colored frosting and bottles of sprinkles.

I knew why. Tomorrow Dad returned.

Mom asked me not to say anything about the agents. Not that I had much information to relay since she'd managed to avoid the topic since bringing me home. Dad only knew about the accident, that I was fine, and the car totaled.

I understood Mom's concern. After their last argument we were lucky to have him home for the holidays at all.

Mom grinned. "That's not all. Look what we've got in the living room."

I followed her into the adjoining room. The branches of a fir tree nearly touched the ceiling. I could barely pick up its scent through the sugared cloud wafting from room to room.

"Do you like the tree?" Mom asked. "It was the best one on the lot."

Meaning most symmetrical, I supposed. There were plastic totes lined beside the tree, lids pulled off and stacked against the sofa.

"Go on," Mom coaxed. "Why don't you put up the first ornament?"

I looked inside the tote. Because my mom was waiting, I grabbed the first decoration that touched my fingers.

The phone rang. While my mom answered I dangled a glittery star from my finger.

She returned to the living room with the phone pressed against her chest. "Aurora, it's Agent Melcher calling to see how you're doing."

I continued staring at the star. "I don't want to talk to him."

Mom hesitated before returning the phone to her ear. "She's doing better. Yes, school's going fine. Her friends are, of course, happy to have her back—as are her teachers."

Mom circled the living room.

"Martial arts?" she asked. "If you say so. We'll get her enrolled in some after-school classes. Right after Christmas? Yes, I understand. Thank you. You, too."

I hung the star from a branch at eye level and looked at it on the tree.

"That was Agent Melcher," she repeated.

A sudden flash of irritation burned through me. Yes, she mentioned that already.

"He would like you to start informal training. He said it will help you during orientation."

I folded my arms over my chest. "I already told you I'm not going back to that place."

Mom gasped. "Aurora, you have to."

"Why?"

"The agents…they said if we don't comply…you'll die."

Her voice quivered and broke on a sob.

I took a step forward, placing a hand on her shoulder. "Mom, it's okay. I just want to know what they want from me. How did the agents even find me to begin with?"

She sniffed and sucked in a breath. "I don't know. When I received the call about your accident they already had you on base."

Sounded more like a kidnapping than a rescue mission if you asked me.

"And what did they tell you?"

"I can't remember," Mom said a little too quickly. "I was in a state of panic. It's hard to remember much. I was in shock."

"Try to remember—they must've said something."

Mom stared beyond me. "They said there was internal bleeding and that your heart was giving out. They mentioned that three organs needed replacing if you were to have any chance of survival." Mom made another choking sound. She took a breath. "They said they were your only hope."

"And what did you agree to in return for my operation?"

"The agents believe you can be a big help to their division. They want you as an operative. Top secret stuff. They gave me their word that you wouldn't come to any harm if I agreed to secrecy and you complied."

My voice quivered. "What kind of operative?"

Mom avoided my eyes. "Only the agents can tell you that."

For all their mumbo jumbo about viruses, modified organisms, and the greater good, I was at a loss as to their intent. Curious as I was, I'd sooner steer clear of the agents all together—for the rest of my life if possible. I didn't want to train. I didn't want to be an operative. I did not sign up for this.

And why were they called agents, anyway? If they were on base, shouldn't they be lieutenants or sergeants?

I held out my arms. "Look at me."

Mom looked.

"Do I look like I should be in the military?"

Mom shook her head slowly.

"I like to read books. I like to write." I lowered my arms and began pacing the room. "You know what I don't like? Gym and whistles. I should be going to college—not the service!"

"Let's just wait until orientation. I'm sure the agents will explain everything there."

"Whatever," I said. "I'm done decorating."

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4
Holiday Blues

The last day of school drifted by in a trance. All the seniors went on about how they couldn't wait for Christmas break and how, "Oh, my God", when we got back it would be graduation year.

At the end of the day, I bypassed my locker to avoid receiving phony smiles and weak hugs.

I boarded my bus and stared out the window until I got home. Snow fell gently from the sky when I disembarked. It was like padding over the earth—soundproof padding. Snow still fascinated me. I'd lived in Alaska my whole life, but when the snow came down in thick white flakes, I could swear there was nothing more beautiful in the world.

A freshman gathered some of the snow in his bare hands and attempted to make a snowball, but it was too dry and turned to dust in his fingers. The herd of kids walking up the street thinned as they disappeared inside their warm homes, until only I remained—trudging alone to my house at the top of the hill.

If I kept walking, maybe I would find myself. I looked ahead to where the end of the road met the woods. She was out there somewhere: The person I was before the accident.

I looked sideways at my house and passed by.

Snow clung to the spruce trees ahead like long white coats. My heart pattered as I approached the clump of woods at the top of the hill. A dirt path led into the cave of bark and branches and silence. I walked toward it.

Inside this clutch of woods, the temperature dropped, and the light dimmed. The spruce trees didn't appear as gentle when I came closer to their sharp needles. I trampled through, keeping my eyes straight ahead. Smaller paths made by moose veered off in random directions.

There was no sound in here. No twigs snapping under hooves or ravens cawing. No rowdy teens sneaking in for a smoke or children crossing over with their sleds to slide down the steep hump at the top of our hill. The world was silent.

The trees didn't taper off where the next neighborhood began—they just stopped. This street was quiet, at least. The homes began to mash together in the next neighborhood until I reached the main road.

Snow snaked in crystallized clouds over the pavement with each passing car. I observed traffic until my toes went numb. No more shivers. I couldn't even feel the cold anymore. When there were no cars in sight in either direction, I crossed to the median, made sure it was still clear, and crossed again.

There was a hill leading to a strip mall with take-out pizza place, dry

cleaners, and video store. I waded my way through the deep snow.

The next part was like something from a dream. When I rose from the hill I saw Fane standing at the top smoking a cigarette with another guy several feet in front of the video store. It was Fane who looked at me in disbelief as though seeing a ghost emerge through the snow. He dropped his cigarette and took several steps forward.

"Aurora?"

A smile hovered on my lips. So he did know my name.

Fane's companion looked me over with a scowl. "Chum of yours, Francesco?" he asked in a British accent.

Fane ignored his friend. He stepped closer. "What are you doing out here?" He gazed into my eyes. When I didn't answer he looked beyond my shoulder. "Do you live nearby?"

"Yes."

"Are you going somewhere?"

"No."

Fane's bystander made a sound of exasperated impatience. He looked a lot like Adrien Brody, the clean-cut version in *The Pianist,* with pale skin, narrow cheekbones, and a lanky, thin frame.

"I'll give you a ride home," Fane said.

I screeched the moment he grabbed my arm. "No!" I wasn't so out of it that I'd get into a moving vehicle with someone other than my mom.

Fane's friend sneered. When he spoke he sounded all snotty British. "It's not enough that you're hanging out with those adolescent twats at Denali, now you're consorting with a girl who is clearly insane."

Fane let go of my arm and glared at his companion. "She was recently in a car accident."

The scowl became further pronounced. "A car accident occurs every second—103,680 a day—over 35,000 fatalities annually in this country alone." He walked around me as he spoke, studying me as though I was a marble sculpture at the Louvre. With my pale skin, I was nearly white enough.

He stopped directly in front of me and stared me in the eyes. "Happens all the time. Get over it."

Fane crossed his arms over his chest. "Maybe it's time you got over it."

"This isn't about me."

"It's always about you," Fane said. He turned to me. "Come on, I'll walk you home."

"I'm not going home."

"Oh, really?" Amusement danced over Fane's eyes. "And where exactly are you going, Aurora Sky?"

I lowered my lashes and tried to think. "I don't know."

"I say you leave her out here to freeze," his buddy said.

Fane rolled his eyes. "I'll be right back. Go pick out your movies. Try to find something with more action and less subtitles."

Fane took my arm and led me down the hill. “Here we go—back home.”

“I don’t want to go back home. She’ll want me to decorate and eat cookies.”

Fane laughed. “Clearly you come from a dysfunctional family.”

He removed his hand when we reached the sidewalk. When there wasn’t a vehicle in sight I nodded my consent to cross.

Fane followed my lead and shadowed my steps. When we reached the opposite side of the road he smiled. “Made it.”

Dressed in his usual black jeans and ribbed tee, he was as dark as doom against the fading light. Even the snow didn’t stick to his long leather jacket.

I didn’t know why he was doing this. I kept expecting him to offer to sell me drugs to ease the pain. But there was no pain, only a numb sense of nothingness, and he made no offers.

“Did you die?” he asked.

I craned my head sideways to look at him.

“You know, white light opening in front of you welcoming you into the heavens?”

“No, there was no white light.”

I looked away. The snow hadn’t let up. If anything, it fell thicker and faster. The flakes were like particles of light broken into tiny fragments across the sky.

My voice dropped. “But there was a white room. I didn’t like the white room.”

“I’m not much for hospitals, myself,” Fane said. He kicked a mound of snow and it scattered like dust. “Avoid them like the plague.” His words ended on a laugh.

We worked our way through the crowded neighborhood and started up the hill that led to the woods.

“Got any Christmas plans?” Fane asked.

I didn’t answer. I didn’t want to think about the gifts my mom would give me in an attempt to buy my forgiveness. I didn’t want to moon over my upcoming orientation with the agents.

As we walked through the woods I imagined Fane taking my hand in his. I wasn’t sure if Valerie was his girlfriend or if they were just fooling around. Either way, he kept his distance, returning me home as though I were a lost puppy.

Well, I wasn’t lost.

Once our feet hit the road, I stopped and turned to Fane. “You can go back now,” I said.

“Is your house nearby?”

“Yes.”

Fane leaned forward. “Very well, Aurora. I’ll wait here in case you try to wander off again.”

I narrowed my eyes. “I’m not a child.”

The shock of blond at the top of Fane's head made the blackened hair on the sides look like demonic angel wings. *I hate your hair*, I felt like saying. Not a child, but certainly feeling childish at the moment.

Fane looked down the street. "Which one's your house?"

I glanced at the yellow home behind me.

"Go home, get warm. I'll leave just as soon as I see you walk through your door."

Why did Fane Donado of all people care whether or not I made it home? I looked him in the eye for the longest time then turned for my house.

"Take care, Aurora Sky," Fane called after me.

I didn't turn my head for a last look. Not even when I reached my door. I guess I was alone in thinking Fane should kiss me before we parted ways. Isn't that what boys did when they walked a girl home?

What a cringe-worthy thought. I had to be the most repressed eighteen-year-old on the planet.

The moment I walked inside my mother accosted me.

"Aurora? Aurora, thank God!" She rushed forward and crushed me in her arms. She stepped back just as suddenly. "You're soaked." She peeled off my coat.

My father stood just past the doorframe in the space between the kitchen and dining room. Usually he wasn't home until eight or nine. Even after a month's absence he chose to spend extra time at the office rather than home. We'd see how long Mom kept her mouth shut this time.

"Where have you been?" Dad demanded.

Mom hurried to fill my silence. "Aurora, your father and I have been worried sick. When you didn't show up after school…well, I didn't know what to think. I called the school. I called your friends."

"And then she called me." My father moved into the doorframe. I didn't know if he meant to walk through and scold me by the front door or block my way to the kitchen until I apologized.

"I am neck deep in work right now. It's the end of the year. You know what that means."

Mom put my coat away. "Yes, I'm sorry, Bill. If I hadn't been so worried…"

"It's not your fault, Dana."

My father looked at me with an expression I'd never seen before. Blame.

Funny, 'cause I wasn't the one who threatened not to come home the last time he left the country on business.

I held him in my gaze. The creases in his forehead deepened.

"Go to your room, Aurora," he said.

"I'll bring you up a cup of warm tea," Mom said.

"No tea. She needs time to think about what she's done."

I really wished I'd get the feeling back in my face because I would have liked to roll my eyes. I wasn't sassy by nature, especially not to dear old Dad,

but it burbled inside me in the form of a smirk twitching over my lips.

"Oh, you think it's funny, do you?" Dad said, stepping toward me.

"Bill!" Mom said.

The fog lifted momentarily, and I saw him clearly—this man who'd stopped raising me, who ceased knowing me years ago. Like the forgotten wife at home, I was the forgotten child. And now that I was an adult, a senior in high school, he thought he could send me to my room?

I leapt to the first stair and faced my parents for one final show down.

"I'll go to my room," I said. "Happily. If you like, I'll even spend Christmas in my room."

Then I raced up the stairs.

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5
Vampire Blood

The agents called me in for orientation at the end of the year. I was to report to duty early in the morning.

Mom didn't have to make any excuses to Dad. He had checked out of Hotel Sky an hour earlier.

Mom sat sipping a diet soda, reading the newspaper at the kitchen table. The ice cubes in her drink cracked against the glass every time she lifted and sipped.

I'd barely taken three bites of my oatmeal.

Mom looked at my bowl. "Is that all you're eating?"

"I'm not hungry."

Mom frowned. "You're going to get hungry if you don't finish your food."

No I wouldn't. Not with my stomach full of knots.

Mom folded up her newspaper. She sounded resigned. "The agents said to bring a change of clothes."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

At least they weren't making me wear camo. Then again, they could have hundreds of pushups and jumping jacks in store. Maybe I would be drenched in sweat by the end of the day.

I stared out the window as we headed downtown toward Elmendorf Air Force Base. Each passing street brought us closer to certain doom. A beige sedan pulled into our lane right in front of us and, instinctively, I threw my right foot forward and pressed it into the mat. My mom pumped the brake and grumbled at the driver.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

I liked the tone of her voice. It was firm and assertive. She never took her eye off the road.

"Yes," I all but whispered.

We drove down the Glenn Highway a short distance before my mom took an exit right and crossed the bridge over the highway to the gated entrance leading into Elmendorf.

The sick feeling in the pit of my stomach returned as we approached the line of cars at the gate. I wasn't aware the feeling had gone until it came back worse than before.

"What if we turned around?" I asked suddenly. "Tell the agents I'm ill. Tell them I'm not ready yet."

"Aurora, you're going to have to get this over with at some point. I think it's best you complete orientation before the new semester starts. You'll feel

better once it's done."

We were currently fourth in line. The lead vehicle, a truck, didn't appear to be going anywhere. A young military man leaned outside the booth, took something from the driver, and disappeared back inside.

"Don't worry," Mom said. "I know you'll do fine."

The military man's head reappeared right before the gate went up, and the truck drove forward. The next vehicle went right in.

Now only one car stood between me and captivity.

I turned to Mom. "Talk to them! Tell them I'll pay them back for the operation. I don't care if it takes me my entire life. I'll get their money back."

"They don't want money," Mom said. "I tried that. I would have paid any price to get you back. But we can't buy organs…the government can. We're lucky. The agents chose you. They wanted you to live."

Melcher and Crist didn't want me to live so much as serve. Why did my mom have to try and glorify this?

The car in front of us sped through the open gate. Mom drove forward, right up to the gates of hell.

"Hello," she said with a bright smile. "I'm Dana Sky, and this my daughter Aurora. We have an appointment with Agent Melcher."

The young military man showed no emotion. "IDs."

Mom and I dug out our wallets and pulled our driver's licenses out of their tight compartments. The man glanced at our cards, turned to a walkie-talkie, and spoke into it. "The VH recruit is here. Over."

Static ensued followed by scratchy words saying, "Send them in. Over."

The young man handed Mom our IDs. He tilted his head toward a black sedan waiting just through the gate. "That black sedan is your escort. Follow him."

The gate lifted and we drove onto the base.

My mom and I didn't speak as she followed the vehicle in front of us. The black sedan tuned on its right blinker. Mom did the same. We followed it down a wooded road. If my internal compass was any good, we were now traveling north, adjacent to the now-hidden Glenn Highway.

"Is this where you came to pick me up before?" I didn't recognize anything, but I was in a fog the last time I left here.

"Yes."

We followed the sedan down a quiet road. A parking lot emerged through the trees, leading directly to a building that looked like a bunker with no windows.

The sedan pulled into a parking spot. Mom took the one beside it.

I turned to my mom. "Will you wait for me?"

I'd seen Mom grab the Nora Roberts novel she was reading. That was a good sign.

"I don't know. I need to ask how long orientation lasts."

Agent Crist stepped out of the passenger seat of the sedan. Agent

Melcher joined her, and they waited for my mom and me to step out. The agents were dressed in their matching gray suits and wool military coats that fell above their knees.

"Good morning, Mrs. Sky. Good morning, Aurora," Agent Melcher said. "No need to come inside, Mrs. Sky. I'll call you when Aurora is finished."

"When will that be?"

"It could take a few days."

"A few days!" my mom and I said at the same time.

Melcher grinned. "That all depends on Aurora."

I turned to my mother with pleading eyes. She hesitated.

"My daughter needs more time."

Relief washed through me. I wanted to throw my arms around my mom in that moment and kiss her cheeks. Only the scowl on Agent Crist's face stopped me.

"She just started her kickboxing and tae kwon do lessons. Couldn't you let her finish senior year first?" Mom asked hopefully.

Crist's eyebrows lowered as her upper lip rose. "The time for negotiations is over, Mrs. Sky. I thought you understood the terms."

Mom looked from me to Agent Crist and frowned. "I just don't see why Aurora has to get started so soon."

Melcher took a step forward. "Don't worry about a thing, Mrs. Sky. We'll call you the moment Aurora is finished. The sooner we start, the sooner she can go home."

Mom frowned then turned and gave me a quick hug. "You'll be fine, sweetie, and as soon as you're done I'll be here to pick you up."

The moment Mom released me she hurried back to the car and pulled away. The pit in my stomach expanded as her car disappeared from sight.

Melcher smiled at me as though I were a child. "Let's go, Aurora. You'll feel better once you understand what's expected of you."

If Melcher was the doting dad, then Agent Crist was the wicked stepmother who couldn't stand to see Melcher's attention directed away from her. I could feel the burn of her frown even on my back.

I followed them through a sliding door into the lobby of the building. A young woman in camouflage pants and a matching jacket sat at a front desk. She nodded at Agents Melcher and Crist with the same detached look as the man at the gate.

"This is our base of operation," Melcher said. "On the right we have our own private hospital and surgeons, which you've already seen. It's small, but it's the state's best. On the left are our administrative offices, where we'll go first. Then in back, we have our training facilities and several holding cells."

What? Were they going to lock me up if I didn't do as I was told?

I followed the agents down a glaring hallway. There were no pictures on the walls. We reached a set of double doors, and Crist swiped a keycard to open them. There was another reception desk manned by yet another drone.

The soldier looked at the agents briefly, never sparing me a glance.

Melcher led me into an office with two desks and shut the door.

There were no photographs on either desk; no pictures on the walls; no décor of any kind unless you counted the wooden cross nailed to the wall. It formed a triangle with Crist and Melcher when they sat down.

"Have a seat," Melcher said.

I selected the chair in front of him. It was either that or fry under Crist's direct glare.

Melcher rested his elbows on his desk and leaned forward.

"Let's get right down to it. Our unit is rather peculiar. We specialize in the identification and elimination of demonic forces." Melcher paused to smile. "Don't worry, we won't ask you to do both. We have undercover informants specially trained to weed out these unholy threats."

At the moment, the only threat I sensed was that of Agents Melcher and Crist.

"You have been recruited for a very special role in the fight against terror, Aurora."

Maybe if I stared at Melcher hard enough he'd come right out and say what he meant.

"What is a VH recruit?" I asked, remembering what the guy at the front gate had said.

"Vampire Hunter," Crist said.

I started laughing so hard I had to grip the arms of my chair to keep from falling to the floor. The agents won points for creativity, I'd give them that. Great way to break the ice. Now we could move onto the real reason I was there.

As my giggles subsided, I noticed Melcher and Crist weren't laughing.

"You heard right," Melcher said. "You've been recruited by your government to eliminate the reanimated dead."

"Vampires," Crist clarified in a harsh voice.

I looked from agent to agent. "Is this some kind of joke?"

Melcher frowned. "The demonic plague is no joke."

Since when did the military start allowing fanatics to run their own special units? Now that I was trapped on base, playing along seemed like the best idea until Mom picked me up and got me the hell out of that madhouse once and for all.

"And how exactly do I eliminate vampires?" I asked.

"That's the beauty of it," Melcher said. "Your body is now a weapon—your blood. As I mentioned briefly before, a team of government scientists recently discovered a combination of organisms that, when mixed with AB negative blood cells, are lethal when consumed by the undead. From there, they found a way to safely inject these organisms into hosts, such as yourself. When your blood cells are transferred from you to the infected, it sends them into a state of temporary paralysis."

Crist looked me in the eyes. “By transferred, he means when one of them bites you.”

Right, ’cause that’s what vampires were all about. Biting people. It definitely concerned me that people like Melcher and Crist had access to automatic weapons.

No wonder Melcher was always smiling. He had a lot of funny ideas in his head. It made me smile, too.

“So are we talking storybook vampires with fangs and claws, only come out in the night, hold the garlic, please?” I asked with a smirk.

“Not exactly,” Melcher answered, missing my sarcasm. “They have every appearance of being human, but they’re not. They’re infected by disease and they feed on healthy humans.”

“Ohhhh,” I said, thinking I finally got it. “You mean sick people who have escaped quarantine. You’ve made me immune so I can hunt them down and bring them back in?”

Crist huffed. “No, he means vampires!”

Melcher continued speaking as though there’d been no interruption. “What you need to understand about the undead is that their disease is what keeps them in their reanimated state. Disease is the trigger. Rabies, plague, porphyria—we can trace plague vampires all the way back to outbreaks in sixteenth century Italy.”

“Are you saying that people who caught the plague never died?”

Sounded more like zombies than vampires to me.

Melcher sucked in a breath and released it quickly. “No, thank goodness. Only individuals with type AB negative blood are at risk.”

I shot up in my chair. “I’m type AB negative! And you injected me with a virus.”

Shit, oh shit, oh shit, oh shit. Why hadn’t I been able to see myself clearly in the mirror since the accident? And why was everything so loud? I swear I’d developed a heightened sense of hearing. But I felt cold, chilled. Vampires loved the cold. I hated the cold. I was panicking. That’s all. This was all just a hazing.

I took a calming breath, determined to play along and not get laughed at when Melcher admitted it was all a ruse and they’d been observing my reactions from the very start.

“So now I’m a vampire?”

I should have earned points for asking with a straight face.

“We have an antidote to prevent that from happening,” Melcher said. “That’s what your monthly injection is for.”

A smile tugged at my lips. “And you’re saying that if I don’t take the *antidote* every month I’ll turn into a vampire?”

Melcher frowned for the first time. “If you stop taking the antidote, you’ll die and there will be no heaven to welcome you on the other side.”

I matched his frown. Maybe it was just me, but I didn’t like people

telling me I was going to hell.

"Are there any side effects to having 'vampire blood'?" I asked, thinking about the distortion in the mirror. At least I had a reflection, even if it wasn't clear. That was a good sign, right?

Melcher looked me up and down. "You might notice some sensitivity at first, but your injections will eventually take care of any…discomforts you may experience. Do you have any specific concerns?"

I pressed my lips together, not in the mood to share with Mr. Self-Righteous.

Instead I asked, "Do you really expect me to believe this?"

Melcher looked at Crist. She nodded, and they stood in unison. I turned my head to follow their movements to the door.

"We understand your denial," Melcher said. "In fact, every new operative goes through it. That's why we've found it best to follow up this introduction with a live demonstration. Follow me."

Right then, getting out of that room sounded good.

I followed the agents out the double doors and back down the way we'd come.

We entered the lobby and turned down another hall leading to the back of the complex, away from freedom. I wondered if the woman at the front desk would come to my aid if I called out for help.

Melcher placed a hand on my back as though sensing my hesitation and pushed me gently forward. I walked faster just to get his hand off me.

When we reached the end of the hall, Crist led us through a set of swinging double doors into a second, shorter hallway. Midway down the hall, she used her key card to unlock a metal door. She held it open, and I followed Melcher into a small, stark room. A long metal table faced a two-way mirror overlooking a brightly lit room.

I peered through the glass, expecting to see whatever creature or thing the agents wanted to show me, but the room was empty except for a metal table in the center.

Maybe they meant to stick me in there and interrogate me.

Crist stood against the door, propping it open. I followed Melcher back into the hall where he stopped in front of room number two and swiped his keycard. A metallic click unlocked the door. Melcher held it open.

He sounded way too serious when he next spoke. "You are about to meet your first vampire, Aurora. I'll warn you, he's no Edward Cullen. I wish there was a way to make this easier on you, but the first experience is always traumatic. To see how your blood infects the creature you will need to let him feed on you. Let me stress that it will come as a shock, but there's nothing to fear. Your blood will protect you."

I didn't realize my feet were making a run for it until Crist grabbed me by the arm. "This way, Aurora."

She released my arm long enough to shove me forward.

I spun around in time to see the door close, trapping me inside. It was the same brightly lit room I'd seen through the window. When I looked at the glass, the other room was gone, replaced by a featureless reflection.

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6
Initiation

There was an electronic crackle, and a voice filled the room. “Welcome to initiation, Aurora. This test will last as long as you want”

I *wanted* out of this insane asylum. I rushed to the door and tried yanking down the silver handle, but it didn’t budge.

I turned and my eyes raced over every square inch of the enclosed room. There was a metal table in the very center. I walked up to it and looked down at the weapons laid on top: a handgun, crossbow, hunting knife, ax, and wooden stake.

The intercom crackled back to life.

“Once the subject has fed on your blood you will need to choose a weapon and finish him off.”

“What? No! I’m not killing anyone. Melcher? Let me out of here.”

“Now!” I screamed.

“Good luck, Aurora.”

I expected something horrible to occur after he signed off, but nothing happened.

I circled the table and kept glancing at the door. Trapped inside a windowless room with weapons that made my skin crawl. Fantastic. There wasn’t even a clock to track the minutes dragging by. If they planned on keeping me locked up for so long they could’ve at least put a chair inside.

I folded my arms over my chest and looked at the two-way mirror.

“What’s the matter with Dracula? Can’t find his cape?” I chuckled, but it sounded uneasy.

I walked over to the far corner of the room and leaned my back against the wall.

There was a hollow knock at the door across the room. It pounded three times in succession, producing an eerie, drawn-out echo.

I wanted to crack a joke, but something didn’t feel right. My heart pounded its way up to my throat and I’d barely swallowed when the door flew open. A middle-aged man in flannel was thrown in. The door slammed shut behind him. He nearly fell on the floor, but caught himself. Long greasy hair covered his face as he bent forward. When he righted himself, I saw that his cheeks were sunken, lips bared over yellow teeth. He snarled and spit leaked out the corners of his mouth.

I stood up straight.

The motion caught his eye. He wheezed when he saw me. His eyes were bloodshot. His clothes looked like they hadn’t been washed in months.

This was no vampire. This was a lunatic.

He crossed the room, passing the weapons laid out on the table. At least

he showed no interest in those.

I sprang to life, skirting the wall as I hustled to the exit on the opposite side.

"Let me out of here!" I pounded on the door. "Let me out!" I screamed so hard my new lungs felt ready to rupture.

The lunatic came snarling toward me. That's what he was, not a vampire, but a deranged madman who'd been locked in the room with me by psychopaths. I was part of some kind of experiment. Maybe this was a test to see how I handled stress. Maybe they wanted me as an altogether different type of operative. They wanted to desensitize me by subjecting me to unimaginable horrors.

Well, I didn't care if I passed. I just wanted out—and not just out of that room.

I kicked the door and walked over to the two-way mirror, glaring so hard my temples throbbed. "Enjoying the show?"

I turned and began circling the room, always keeping the table between me and the madman. He kept coming at me slowly, like a zombie in a horror film. At least he'd shown no sudden bursts of locomotion.

We moved clockwise around the room. The space was so small it made me dizzy, but still I moved, matching the maniac's speed to keep him as far from me as possible.

My neck soon ached from constantly craning it over my shoulder to keep track of the lunatic's location. I suppose I had my physical therapist to thank for being able to walk for miles on end. Unfortunately, my pursuant showed no signs of fatigue, either.

Round and round we went until my stomach began turning and my vision blurred.

It took a while for the first feelings of exhaustion to creep inside my consciousness. A snarling, slobbering loony will keep a girl on her toes. But hours began to feel like days, and finally, I collapsed when rounding a corner. I hit an elbow as I landed, sending a tingle up my arm. My pursuer came toward me at the same creepy pace. His eyes opened wider and murky irises burned inside.

I scrambled back to my feet and stumbled forward. I glared into the two-way mirror.

"Why are you doing this to me?" I screamed.

I rushed to the table and picked up the revolver. Before this moment I'd never even held a gun. I pointed it at the madman. His stared back with vacant eyes, sunk inside a twisted face. "Stay where you are!"

He looked at me, not the gun, snarled, and kept coming.

I retreated and began sobbing when I re-entered the circle.

Make it end. Whatever it takes.

I turned suddenly and aimed the gun at the man's leg with a shaky hand. The last time I felt terror this all-consuming was right before that SUV took

me out. My heart seized inside my chest as I pulled back the trigger.

Nothing happened.

"Shit!" I screamed.

I dropped the gun. It clattered over the floor as I sprinted away and resumed my place circling directly across from the man.

Tears leaked down the corners of my eyes. It could have been the middle of the night for all I knew. I could suddenly understand how people went crazy. Maybe that's what the agents were really up to—some sick experiment to make a loon out of me.

I glanced over my shoulder. The last of my energy was beginning to drain. I willed my feet to keep moving, but at some point they stopped and I stood rooted in place. The maniac's rasp was much too loud. It sounded like hissing. It was disgusting. The fear in my heart had lessened due to extreme fatigue, but as the foul being closed in on me, terror renewed itself like a jolt of electricity to the brain.

I intended to shove him onto the floor. He didn't look sure-footed enough to handle much force. Bracing myself, I slammed both palms against his chest, but instead of falling, the madman grabbed my arm in a bruising crush and pulled me toward him with a deafening snarl.

At that point, my heart stopped beating. I opened my mouth, but was unable to inhale or exhale.

A cold, sweaty hand gripped my face so hard it felt like my jaw would break.

I would have liked to know that in the last instant I struggled. That I fought for my life. But I didn't. I was paralyzed. I even suspected my own heart—at least the one I was given—might kill me before the madman did.

I felt his teeth at my neck. His hand loosened around my face. My heart began pounding inside my ears, thumping against my chest. His teeth tore into my neck. He broke through my skin and pierced deep inside my flesh. It was invading and it was revolting and stirred a nauseating arousal inside me that I couldn't explain. Blood rushed to my head. My pulse pounded at my neck.

Then he began to suck.

I tilted my head back and closed my eyes. I envisioned needles extracting blood. Vials filling with thick, red gore. The clammy lips on my neck felt like a suction slowly draining the life from me.

With a sudden jerk, I was released. The thing, whatever it was, began to spasm beside me. It thrashed and gasped as though in agony. Its eyes widened until they looked like they would pop out of their sockets.

I lay spent across the floor, like a bloody human rag. I looked toward the mirror. "What did you do to me?"

"Congratulations, Aurora, you have poisoned your first vampire. As you can see, he is in a state of paralysis. He can barely move. Unfortunately, the effect is only temporary, a contingency we're working on, but eventually he will get up and want to feed again."

I felt like throwing up when I heard the word "feed." Instinctively I touched my neck and pulled back bloody fingers.

"This is your gift, Aurora. Your blood. Now finish the creature off."

I pushed myself into sitting position and looked toward the mirror. The ghoulish wheezing behind me didn't let up. Several minutes passed before the faint crackle reemerged.

"If you don't take the creature's life, you will have to do this all over again. We can't let you out of this room until the thing is dead. A word of warning—the creature is capable of killing. He could snap your neck or suffocate you."

I thought I was too overcome to allow terror to return, but the first shiver rocked through me. I'd avoided looking at the body behind me. The sounds it made were ghastly. I almost wanted to kill it just to make the noise stop. It was that four-letter word that anchored me to the ground.

Kill.

How could I?

"You're asking me to commit murder," I said to the mirror.

"Murder would involve killing another human. This is not human."

I gathered my knees in my arms and laid my head on them.

"Aurora, this creature is a killer. Before we captured it, it killed women and children without discrimination—hundreds, possibly thousands of victims over time. Think of the lives you could save. This isn't murder. This is justice."

"Please just let me out of this room."

"You know what you need to do to get out."

I looked up at the silver table in the center of the room. From the ground, I couldn't see the weapons. I got to my feet and stumbled on the first step. The weapons were spread across the metal table like a killer's buffet.

The gun had been a no go. The knife gave me shivers, as did the ax.

I grabbed the wooden stake, tightening my fist around the smooth handle.

The intercom was silent, but I could hear the static voice inside my head. *"Good, Aurora. Now take that stake and drive it through the creature's heart."*

I turned around. The vampire twitched on the floor. Blood trickled down his chin—my blood. I approached slowly. Now I was the hunter. I knelt so close to the body it touched me every time it convulsed. Its fetid breath prickled my nostrils. I raised the stake. I held my arm high, as though preparing to swing a hammer into a nail. The stake remained suspended in air. I was a photograph, a statue, a cartoon frozen in still life until the creature stopped twitching and attempted to lift himself off the ground.

I raised my arm higher then slammed the stake down. It pierced the vampire in the gut. The thing cried out and clawed at my ankle. I lifted the stake again.

It's like a peg, I told myself. *It's like putting a peg inside a cribbage board.*

I closed my eyes at the last minute and ended up puncturing the vampire in the throat. Blood gushed out. Bile filled my mouth. I swallowed and screamed; raised the stake again, aimed, and pounded the weapon into his heart.

The vampire went limp. I pulled out the stake. It slipped from my hand and clattered to the ground. For a moment I was only aware of my own shaky breath.

The door to the room opened and Agents Melcher and Crist walked in. Melcher applauded. "Bravo, Agent Sky."

I swiped several loose strands of hair off my forehead. I'd probably just rubbed blood over my face, but I didn't care. At the moment, I wanted to smear it like war paint over my cheeks, leap up, and attack Agent Melcher.

Melcher grinned. "It may not feel like it now, but you did well, Aurora. You passed."

I stood up slowly. My arms and shirt were covered in blood. "What happens to people who don't pass?"

"Some let themselves get killed by the creature." Agent Melcher walked over to the body. "This one nearly destroyed the last test subject."

"And you let him live?"

Agent Crist stepped in. "It is not up to us to kill it."

Melcher circled the body. "Some subjects try to take off after completing orientation, but we always catch them."

I caught his eye. "What do you do with people who try to run?"

"We don't kill them if that's what you're wondering. We make them useful in other foreign divisions—desk work." Melcher's grin widened. He had perfect white teeth. They were obnoxious.

"Then there are the ones who go crazy," Crist said.

Melcher clasped his hands together. "But! Let's talk about the ones who become agents, our team of vampire hunters. We didn't just bring you back to life, Aurora. We made you superhuman. Other agents dream of having your gift."

"What? To become a vampire's chew toy?"

Melcher chuckled. "You serve a far greater purpose than that."

"Yeah? And what purpose is that?"

"Haven't you been listening to a word I've said? Your purpose is to rid the world of evil." Melcher clapped his hands. "But that will come in time. For now, go home. Go to school. We want all our young agents to obtain a high school diploma and we encourage college, as well. You don't have to give up your life, Aurora. Far from it. In fact, we want to give you a chance to get back to normal."

How normal was he talking?

"Can I still go to Notre Dame?"

"Unfortunately not," Melcher said. "You're needed in Alaska. This state's become the latest hot spot for the reanimated dead. They appear to be gravitating to the dark."

"And cold," Agent Crist added.

All thoughts of vampires were momentarily forgotten as a horrifying thought occurred to me. "You mean I can't leave Alaska?"

"You get time off for vacation, naturally, but no, you can't move out of state."

They should never have revived me. They should have just let me die in peace. At least I might've had a shot at heaven, or even peaceful oblivion, opposed to a lifetime confined to this frozen hell.

"Does my mom know what you've recruited me for?"

"She's been briefed, but I warn you, she's under contract not to speak of it."

"Even to me?"

"You are the one who needs to hold your tongue, Aurora. Your work here is top secret."

"As is the existence of vampires," Crist said.

"We've dropped a bomb over you," Melcher said. "But I think you can handle it."

"A bomb?" I repeated and looked at the bloody corpse on the floor.

A terrifying thought occurred to me. "Will I get rabies now?"

Melcher shook his head. "You already have rabies. That's one of the viruses we injected you with and why you must take the antidote every year."

Crist shot me a snide look. "Unless you want to end up like him."

I cupped my palm over my bleeding neck and watched the body to see if it would turn to dust. It didn't.

"Don't worry about any more of those for a while," Melcher said. "We want you to train first. We can assign you a personal trainer on base or you can continue taking classes near home. The choice is yours."

"Can I take a shower now?"

"Of course, come with me." Agent Melcher turned his head to talk as he led me toward the open door. "I know this is a tough time to be taking on extracurricular activities, but at least it's your last semester of high school."

I focused on the exit. Melcher and Crist moved at a snail's pace, as though they were out for a winter stroll. They stopped in front of the door.

"Good work, Agent Sky," Melcher said with a smile.

Crist looked me over. "Try to make it less messy next time."

The agents exited first. I stepped out after them. The clinical white room led into more blinding whiteness. I got the feeling I wasn't escaping at all.

I was washed up and waiting in the lobby when my mother arrived.

“I came just as soon as I got your call,” she said to Agent Melcher. “How did orientation go?”

“It went well, Mrs. Sky. You should be very proud of your daughter. I can see you’ve taught her to excel in all areas of life.”

Mom’s voice rose. “Oh. Thank you.”

“I know it’s not the future you envisioned for your daughter, but Aurora has a chance to make a difference in the world.”

I tuned them out and stared at the clean sneakers on my feet. The old pair had been disposed of, as had my bloody clothes. The facility’s showers were as white and clinical as the test room. Both locations made the blood more vivid. In the shower, it mixed with water and turned into a river of red that swirled around the tile by my feet before emptying down the drain.

I touched the bandage Crist had affixed to my neck. “Can we go now?”

My mother smiled. “I don’t know.” She turned to Agent Melcher. “Are we free to go?”

Melcher swept his arm open. “Of course. Aurora completed orientation with flying colors. Next we’ll assign her a mentor—someone who has been through the same process and can show her the ropes. Thank you for making the trip down, Mrs. Sky. Aurora, we’ll be in contact.”

I nodded, but couldn’t meet Melcher’s eye. I didn’t ever want to look at Melcher again except to give him the finger, and even then I didn’t want to look into those smug, conniving eyes.

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7
Resolutions

"So orientation went well?" Mom asked cheerfully as we got inside the car. "How should we celebrate? A movie? Dinner out?"

I bet she'd stop smiling if I told her I'd killed a man.

"I want to go home."

The reflection from the snow hurt my eyes. I shielded my face with one hand.

Once Mom drove through the gates she cleared her throat and asked how it had gone.

"We're not supposed to talk about it, remember?" I hadn't meant to sound so rude, but I wasn't about to apologize either.

"Oh," Mom said. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to break any rules."

I snorted.

"How long have I been away?"

Mom's eyes darted sideways then back to the road. "You don't know…" She stopped herself. "I dropped you off yesterday morning."

"Didn't Dad wonder where I was all night?"

"I told him you were spending the night with Denise."

"Denise is in Girdwood." *Having a real holiday at the ski lodge.*

Mom leaned forward into the steering wheel. "So, that's it for orientation? You're done?"

Yeah, I was done all right. Now I could get onto the training and killing.

I wished my mom would just shut up and drive.

"Yep, I get to spend the next semester being a normal teenage girl."

"That's great, honey."

My sarcasm really wasn't getting through to anyone.

Mom put her blinker on as she approached our neighborhood. Our street still needed plowing, which meant the car had to do the work of pushing through snow. She clicked open the garage door and pulled in. As soon as she turned off the car, Mom turned to me and said, "Tomorrow's New Year's Eve. I think everything will be better once we put this year behind us."

Great, another holiday.

I unclicked my seatbelt. "Wow, a new year."

Mom followed me from the garage into the living room.

"New leaf. New me. I feel some resolutions coming on," I said. "I resolve to break the sixth commandment." I stomped over the linoleum floor between the dining room and kitchen, calling out my resolutions.

"I resolve to live out the rest of my life in this godforsaken state. I resolve to get drunk for the first time. I resolve to finally kiss a boy. No, scratch that. I resolve to lose my virginity!"

Mom's face turned red. "Aurora, stop it."

"Stop what?"

"This isn't you."

"You're right. This isn't me." I turned on my heel and stormed up the stairs to my room, slamming the door behind me. The *bang* echoed through the walls. I ripped open my top desk drawer and threw a legal pad onto the surface with a *thwack*.

Aurora's Resolutions

I pressed my pen into the notepad so hard it indented the pages five sheets back.

kill first vampire
get drunk
kiss a boy
lose virginity

I stared at the list then leaned forward and crossed out kill first vampire.

Everything else should be a piece of cake.

I stuffed the notepad back inside the desk drawer then moved onto my dresser and began digging through my scarf drawer, dumping them onto the floor.

One scarf in particular caught my attention.

I snatched the red one out of the tangle of fabric and locked myself inside the bathroom. For a long time I stood in front of the mirror using my peripheral vision to check out the figure reflected in the glass. Whenever I tried to look at her, she was covered in blood and scars.

I focused on the bandage instead and peeled it off slowly. There were teeth marks in my neck rimmed in purple, blue, and red. I dabbed at it with a wad of tissue paper then threw out the bandage.

I wrapped the soft red scarf around my neck and remained in my room until Mom called me down to dinner.

"What's with the scarf?" Dad asked, knife and fork poised several inches off the table on either side of his plate.

"Don't you like it?"

"Why do you have it on inside the house?"

"'Cause I feel like it."

Dad's eyes narrowed a fraction, probably at the snide pitch in my voice. He turned to Mom. "So are you coming to the party tomorrow or not?"

Mom chewed on her lip before answering. "I don't know if I should leave Aurora alone…"

I stabbed a piece of broccoli. "I'm eighteen. Of course you can leave me alone."

"With everything that's happened—" Mom said to Dad as though I'd never spoken.

"It's not like I'm going anywhere. Don't drive anymore, remember? Don't have friends, either. You two should go enjoy yourselves. I promise not to burn down the house."

"That's enough!" Dad said. "I'm not sure I like this new attitude of yours."

I turned to my mom. "Maybe the agents replaced my brain as well and I've inherited someone else's attitude."

"What are you talking about?" Dad asked.

"I'm staying home," Mom said.

"Fine, do whatever you want." The legs on Dad's chair scraped against the floor as he pushed back. He went into the living room, where he turned on the news.

"Aurora," Mom said.

I folded my arms over my chest and waited for the rest, but that was it. Just my name. Mom started down at her plate, tears glazing her eyes.

Aw, hell.

I slipped into the chair beside her. "Look, I know I've been a pain in the neck lately…" I stopped and laughed.

Mom didn't so much as crack a smile.

"Anyway, you should go to the party with Dad. I'll be fine. Promise. I could use a little time to myself."

"I don't think I'll go."

"Why not?"

Mom shook her head. "I don't know anyone at those parties."

"You know Dad."

"Everyone knows your father, and they'll all want to talk to him."

"So go for the free food and drinks."

"I don't know."

"Go."

"I guess I could go. I do every year."

"Right. They'll be expecting you."

As far as attending Dad's holiday function, Mom dragged her heels, literally, right up to the last minute when she shuffled across the carpet in her black pumps. She ended up taking a separate vehicle. Fine, whatever made her more comfortable.

As soon as the garage door closed, I headed down to the wine cellar.

Time to start on the list of resolutions and *número uno* was: Get Drunk. It was New Year's Eve, after all. After years of disuse, Dad had converted part of the downstairs into his beloved wine cellar: a walk-in oak enclosure much

like a sauna, only this one was cool with long bottles laid across wood planks, mostly reds. At the far corner was a small selection of champagne. I grabbed a bottle of Moet—what the celebs drank during the Oscars.

I set the bottle on the kitchen table and removed the foil around the cork. After the first attempt to twist the metal cap off failed, I studied the cork. How did I get this thing off? Weren't they supposed to pop off on their own? I grabbed the bottle by the neck and pointed it at the wall. I'd already lost a heart, kidney, and lung—I didn't want to add an eye to the list. I pushed my thumb against the cork. It didn't budge. I pushed harder and the cork shot out, hit the wall, and *thunked* to the floor.

I giggled. "Whoo-ee!"

Foam bubbled up the bottle's neck and spilled over the edges like one of those erupting volcanoes kids made with baking soda and vinegar for the fourth grade science fair. I leaned forward and sucked in a mouthful of foam.

I lifted the bottle in the air. "Happy New Year!"

So I was early. It was midnight somewhere in the world. It was nearly midnight in Massachusetts.

I walked around from room to room drinking straight from the bottle. I paused in front of the framed photos in the family room. I took another swig. "Happy New Year, Dad. Happy New Year, Mom."

I walked upstairs, turned my stereo on, and danced, bottle in hand. I bowed to my dresser. "So this is where the hottest party of the year is being held. Who knew?"

I drank and danced. I used the bottle as a microphone and discarded it when it was empty. There was more downstairs, but the cellar was a long way down, and I was feeling lightheaded. Bed was looking good, but it wasn't even midnight yet.

Finally I collapsed on top of the blankets. I hadn't fallen asleep so heavily since the accident. The moment my head hit the pillow, I was gone. Sweet oblivion until I woke sometime in the middle of the night. My room was shrouded in darkness. I knew I'd left the light on before falling asleep.

What concerned me more was I could hear breathing that wasn't my own.

Two sick yellow eyes glowed from a twisted face. He wore the same dirty flannel shirt. I sat up in bed. "What are you doing here? I killed you."

He grinned and approached slowly.

My hands trembled above the covers. "I'm warning you. Get out of here. You're not real." I covered my head in my hands and rocked myself. "You're not real." I squeezed my eyes shut. When I reopened them his teeth were affixed to my neck. I screamed. I began flailing against the covers all the while screaming to a shattering pitch. "You're not real!"

"Aurora! Aurora, wake up." My mother shook me.

Didn't she get it? I was awake. I'd always been awake. I slapped at her and resumed the fetal position, face in my knees and arms covering my head.

“My God, what’s wrong with her?”

There was an edge to my father’s voice. I didn’t have to look at him to know his jaw bones were clenched around his chin. I listened from the safety of my tight enclosure.

“It’s just a nightmare.”

“It’s more than that. She hasn’t been right since the accident.”

“We have to give her time, Bill. Bill?”

My parents’ voices moved out of my room. They crossed the hall into the master suite, fainter now.

“Bill, what are you doing?”

“I’m packing a bag.”

“Where are you going?”

“Somewhere I can get a decent night’s sleep.”

I smiled inside my cocoon, not because I thought it was funny, not because I was glad, but because I couldn’t help it. People reacted so predictably under pressure. Running was the easiest course of action. If only I could run away too.

My father’s footsteps moved in a flurry around the room down the hall. It wasn’t until he’d zipped his bag that my mother attempted to appeal to him one last time. “Bill, please don’t go.”

He didn’t answer. His feet pounded down the stairs. I heard him grab his set of keys from the hall table. He started his car in the garage just below my bedroom. The garage door went up, and the car pulled out with a roar then took off down the street.

I heard my mother walk inside my room. “Your father needed some time alone,” she said weakly.

I kept my head planted in my knees.

Mom rubbed my back. “My poor girl. You need to get better. This needs to stop.”

I lifted my head. “Don’t you get it? This is who I am now. You signed the contract. It can never be undone.”

“You don’t have to act this way. We can go back to the way things were. You’re just not trying hard enough.” She looked at me with pleading eyes.

I sighed. “Get some rest, Mom. I’ll try not to bother you with any more of my demonic dreams.”

As predicted, my mother didn’t ask for details about the aforementioned dreams. She kissed my forehead and shuffled into the empty bed that awaited her. I lay back and stared at the ceiling. I shut my eyes, but he was there looking at me again. He would always be looking at me. No matter what he’d been, I’d killed him. I was a murderer.

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8
The Mouseketeers

The throbbing inside my skull woke me the following morning. I dragged myself downstairs and found my mom not looking so hot herself. She wore a light blue robe and fuzzy slippers. Her face was puffy when she looked up from her paper. She eyed the red scarf around my neck warily.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"I have a headache."

"I saw the empty bottle of champagne in your room."

"Had to celebrate somehow." I shrugged. "Which reminds me, Happy New Year."

Mom's lip quivered. Tears gathered in her eyes.

"Look, sorry about the scene last night. Obviously I was under the influence. Tell Dad I was drunk and that it won't happen again."

Mom blinked several times and nodded. "You shouldn't have had the entire bottle."

"I learned my lesson."

The lesson was to lie through my teeth so my mom wouldn't worry so much.

While I had been off getting my neck chewed open, Denise spent the holiday with her family at Alyeska Resort—skiing by day, hot tubing by night.

She sipped coffee from a paper cup with her friend Erin in front of our lockers the first day of school.

Second semester. The end was near. Literally.

I threw back my shoulders before joining the girls. "Hi, guys! How was your holiday?"

Denise and Erin exchanged looks at my cheerful tone. Mom had advised me to be more peppy. Like if I acted that way, I'd feel that way. Fat chance.

"Fine," Denise said. "How was yours?"

"Wild!" My mouth expanded on the word.

"That's nice," Denise said, turning back to Erin. "So anyway, like I was saying, Alan Baxter called me yesterday to invite me to the winter ball."

Once upon a time, in a world without vampires, Denise would have tracked me down to share that news.

"When's winter ball?" I asked.

"At the end of the week."

"What did you tell him?" Erin asked.

"I told him yes."

"Who do I want to go to winter ball with?" I pondered aloud.

This was enough to pull Denise's attention away from Erin. "Aurora, you've been acting like a complete freak lately. Who's going to want to go take you to winter ball?"

I never realized how little I cared for Denise until now.

I straightened to my full height and took a step toward her. "You mean I haven't quite been myself since I nearly DIED?"

She glared at me, keeping her ground even though I was practically in her face.

"Um, I should get going to class," Erin said.

Denise shot me a nasty look before turning to Erin. "I'll come with you."

Good. Denise should be friends with someone whose mission in life was something other than killing vampires.

I could make new friends, too. Maybe even ones who were aware of 'demonic beings', as Melcher called them. I thought about the hickey I'd seen on the black-haired girl's neck. Only I no longer believed it was a hickey.

It was just a hunch, but there was only one way to find out.

I made my way to the girl's bathroom in C Hall and, sure enough, I noticed three familiar forms: the juniors with their varying shades of highlights. I followed them inside the girls' bathroom.

They were all short, like they'd formed a club—the Three Mouseketeers.

I set my backpack on the counter in front of the mirror and made a show of digging through my bag. A toilet flushed behind me. There was a spray of water at my side. The warning bell rang, and several girls rushed out. The Mouseketeers kept their places at the mirror, applying liner and rouging their lips. At least they didn't chatter.

When the final bell rang and it was just the four of us in the ladies' room, I unwrapped my scarf, folded it, set it on the counter in a corner clear of water drops, and turned my exposed neck to the mirror, reflecting the fading wound. I dug around in my pack again.

The hooded girl looked over and nodded at my neck. "What is that?"

I pulled out a tube of pink lipstick, puckering my lips after I applied pale pink shimmer. "What does it look like?"

The girl with the red streaks in her hair laughed. "It looks like you and your boyfriend had a heavy make-out session."

"Oh, please," I said with a roll of my eyes. "Like I need a boyfriend. What I've got is so much better."

"And what's that?"

"None of your biz."

All three girls turned toward me and folded their arms.

"Wait a minute," Red said. She lowered her arms. "Are you the girl who was in a coma?"

"Yep." My lips puckered as I formed the word.

The two other Mouseketeers lowered their arms. They looked me up and down. “I heard they had to reattach your body parts.”

“Nope, just replace my organs.”

“Wicked.”

Red took a step toward me. For someone so short, she did a good job of giving me the once-over. “So are you looking to party?”

I tossed my lipstick inside my pack and picked up my scarf. “I’m not *looking* to party. I party.”

“I’m Whitney,” Red said. “This is Noel and Hope.”

“Noel,” I repeated, looking at the girl in the hoodie. “Don’t tell me your parents wanted to give you an ‘Alaskan’ name, too?”

“I was born on Christmas.”

“Then I guess you’re in the right place.”

Whitney lifted her chin as I threw my scarf over my shoulder. “Where’d you get it?”

“The mall.”

She smiled slightly and waited.

“Crashed a party across town during the holiday.”

“It wasn’t one of Marcus’s, was it?” Noel asked. “Marcus throws the best parties.”

Crap. I hadn’t thought this through enough.

I rolled one of the red fringes at the end of my scarf between my fingers as I reached for an answer. “I didn’t get a name. I didn’t really care, if you know what I mean.”

“Sure,” Whitney said, though her expression said otherwise.

“Want to hang with us in the library?” Noel asked.

I hesitated. This badass group hung out at the library?

As though reading my thoughts, Whitney laughed. “Hall monitors don’t bother us in the library. They think our teachers sent us there to study.”

“Oh, clever.”

The four of us started out the door.

“I like your scarf,” Hope said.

“Thanks, I’m ironic like that.”

The juniors, it turned out, had some tricks to teach me. The library, for instance, was a sanctuary from the humdrum boredom of the classroom, and no one bothered us there. Believe it or not, the lounge inside the front office was another safe haven where a student could sit undisturbed, and if the secretary happened to get off her lethargic ass, you just said you were there to see your counselor or waiting for a parent to pick you up for a doctor’s appointment. During third period, the music room was unoccupied, and we could mess around by creating our own out-of-tune masterpieces or let Whitney play real music.

“Are you guys going to winter ball?” I asked as Noel made her way down her keyboard, pressing each key from left to right.

"We don't go to school dances," Hope said.

No, of course not.

Fane Donado didn't go to school dances, either.

His loss, 'cause I'd made up my mind to attend winter ball even if I had to go stag. If he bothered to show up I might have asked him to dance.

On the walk home he'd proved he had a sensitive side. And if Fane could dance half as well as he played badminton it could be fun.

But I'd never seen Fane at a school dance.

Not once.

Not ever.

At least we had gym together. I couldn't wait to say 'hi' now that we were on speaking terms.

I changed into my gym clothes quickly with the other girls in the locker room, pulling stray strands of hair out of my scarf into a ponytail.

Inside the gymnasium, Mr. Mooney rolled out a cart filled with basketballs. The eager beavers were already dribbling balls down the court, warming up.

I paced the floor, keeping my eyes peeled for Fane. Seconds before the warning bell rang, he pushed through the double doors, Valerie by his side. I tried to catch his eye, but Fane ignored me completely. It was as though I had dreamed the entire encounter of him walking me home in the snow.

How stupid of me to believe someone at this school might actually notice what I was going through. Not Fane. Not anyone.

Fane took a seat behind Valerie and began massaging her shoulders. Valerie leaned her head back and closed her eyes. I felt like chucking a basketball at them.

I grabbed a ball and beat it to the ground with my fist. Over and over it bounced back for further abuse.

Mr. Mooney blew his whistle. "All right, everyone, as you can see, we're playing basketball this month. Let's break into teams. AJ, Brooke, I'm making you team captains. Start picking your teammates."

AJ and Brooke walked to the middle of the gym and faced the rest of us. AJ poised his ball under an arm at his side. Brooke hugged hers to her stomach.

"Paul," AJ said.

"Tyler."

"Mike."

"Angie."

What bullshit. Low and behold, I was one of the last to be called onto Brooke's team. I didn't play in the first game. In the next, I raced up and down the court, capable of matching anyone's speed with energy to spare. No one passed me the ball, so I snatched it when the opposing team failed to catch a pass. I pounded down the court to the awaiting hoop. Clayton came at me with a cocksure grin on his lips. I slammed my shoulder into him and

shoved him to the ground. Clayton landed on his ass with a *thud*.

The blast of Mr. Mooney's whistle pierced every ear in the gym. "Sky, what was that?"

Everyone looked at me. That much attention might have mortified me before. Now I lifted my chin. "He was in my way."

"Then go around him."

Mr. Mooney gave three blasts of his whistle. "All right, back to the game, everyone. Sky, you're out."

I shrugged and walked over to the bleachers, sitting at the bottom, several rows in front of Fane and Valerie.

Valerie's voice drifted down. "Someone doesn't know how to play nice."

I faced forward as I replied, "I guess comas aren't enough to get a girl out of gym class. What does it take these days? Herpes?"

I felt the bleachers shift and creak. "You better watch your mouth or I'll put you back in a coma."

"Oh please, save that line for a freshman."

The bleachers shuddered when she stood.

I stood, too, and whipped around. There was no longer a smile on my lips. "You want to do this now or after class?"

I wanted to see Fane's expression, but I couldn't break eye contact with Valerie.

"God," Valerie said in mock pity. "That accident must have really messed up your brain. I could kick your ass, little girl, but I don't fight handicaps."

I had to say something. Fane was watching.

I narrowed my eyes. "And I don't fight cowards."

With that, I leapt off the bleachers and headed for the locker room.

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9
Winter Ball

The next day, I added gym to the skip list. Hope and I hung out in the library. Apparently, Whitney never missed keyboarding, and Noel had a crush on her second-period Psych teacher.

I'd worked out a routine where I could avoid Denise almost entirely. In the morning, I went straight from the bus to English. I skipped math altogether, avoiding Denise and the numeric hell that was Algebra II.

No need to worry about keeping my place with Notre Dame. I wasn't going anywhere so to fuck with it.

The Mouseketeers treated me with a certain respect I was becoming accustomed to.

"Was that your first bite?" Whitney asked one day in the library when the four of us were seated together at a table by the back wall.

I tightened my scarf. "Yeah."

"How was it?"

"How was it?" I repeated. Those sick yellow eyes returned to me—like a smoker whose whites have discolored. I shuddered.

Noel propped a hand under her chin. Her hood was pulled back and her hair fell over her shoulders. "I'll never forget my first bite."

"Why don't you tell me about it?"

"His name was Henry, and when he sunk his teeth into my neck I could feel him break through each layer of skin right down to my vein. It was agonizing, but then there was this sudden rush and release of blood, as though my body wanted to give him as much as he wanted to take. My heart was all over the place. I was like a deer in the headlights. You know—stunned."

I was momentarily speechless. "And you, Hope? What was your first time like?"

Hope twirled a strand of red hair. "Well, I'm not a poet like Noel, but it was unforgettable. I guess that much is obvious. And it was with Henry's friend, Gavin."

I looked at Whitney. "And you, Whit?"

"Henry was my first, as well." Whitney laughed. "He likes to whisper sweet nothings inside your ear. He likes to compare your skin to the finest porcelain and say his heart won't go on if he can't have one taste of your sweet blood."

"Gavin wasn't much for words—just biting," Hope said.

Noel laughed. "And sucking."

Hope smacked Noel on the shoulder.

"So what was the name of your first?" Whitney asked.

"I'd rather forget," I said. "He turned out to be a brute."

"You have to watch out for the brutes," Noel said. "Let me know if you need me to kick anyone's ass, 'cause I can do that."

Hope smiled. "Noel's small, but freakishly strong."

"Thanks, but I'm pretty good at kicking ass, myself."

Noel flipped her black and blond-streaked hair over one shoulder. "If you ever need back-up, just say the word."

"Same goes for you. How long have you guys known about vampires?"

Whitney leaned back in her chair. "I found out at the end of sophomore year. I was heavy into coke back then, and a friend from West High invited me to a party. She said there was going to be something better than drugs. Hope came with me."

"We found out together," Hope said.

"And we saw Noel there."

Noel smiled. "It was one of Marcus's parties."

"Who's Marcus? Is he a student at West?"

Noel grinned. "Not Marcus. He's too old. Well, they're all old, but he looks it."

"How old are we talking?"

Noel looked at Whitney and shrugged. "Twenty-six?"

"Or twenty-eight."

"Anyway, he lives by West High and his friends Henry and Gavin do the school routine and find kids who like to party with the undead."

I sat up. "And they just reveal themselves to you like that? 'Surprise! I'm a vampire, mind if I suck your blood?'"

Hope chuckled. "She's funny."

"They're a bit more selective then that," Noel said. "They seek a certain type."

"And what type is that?"

"The seriously fucked-up type."

The Mouseketeers laughed in unison. Whitney leaned forward and grabbed my wrist. "Welcome to the club, Aurora. I'm guessing your accident messed you up pretty good."

I grinned. I liked these girls. They couldn't begin to imagine what I was, but I wasn't alone after all. Just so long as they didn't discover I was out to destroy the creatures whose bite they found so addictive.

"Your turn," Noel said. "How did you first become acquainted with vampires?"

Acquainted. I liked that word. As though one strolled up to me one day and said, *"So I'm a vampire. We do exist. Crazy, huh? Oh, and nice to meet you. Mind removing your scarf so I can bite you?"*

"It was sort of sprung on me," I said. "Like, out of the blue."

Whitney and Hope bobbed their heads. Noel studied the black polish on her nails. It wasn't until later that it occurred to me she never did divulge how she came to be partying with vampires or how long it had been going on.

After leaving the library and waving goodbye to the juniors, I turned and found myself face-to-face with Valerie.

"I was beginning to wonder if you'd driven your car off a cliff, but it turns out you've just been making friends with lowerclassmen. Probably a good idea since you'll most likely end up repeating senior year."

"I suppose you'd know about that. What is this—your sixth year at Denali?"

Valerie took a step forward, but stopped when a hall monitor rounded the corner and headed our way. She smiled with deep red lips. "As much as I'd enjoy kicking your ass, I *do* plan on graduating. Got to get to class. We'll talk later."

I rolled my eyes as Valerie headed off. Once she was out of my face, I noticed Fane propped against the far wall watching us…or me, rather, now that Valerie had stormed off. I could take the far hallway and avoid walking past him, but then I'd have to do a lap around the school to get to my locker. Besides, Fane needed to know I wouldn't be intimidated by him or his wench.

He grinned as I walked past. "Shouldn't you be in class?"

"Shouldn't you?"

He pushed off the wall and walked toward me. "We've missed you in gym. I enjoyed your little performance the other day."

I turned my head to follow Fane's movements as he circled me.

"I'm glad to see that you're feeling better," he continued.

"Yep. Never better."

He stared at the red scarf around my neck. I didn't take my eyes off him.

"Good," he said slow and sensual. He stepped in my path as I tried to walk past.

My heartbeat quickened. There had to be something seriously sick about feeling aroused by a person who pissed me off.

My jaw tightened. "Get out of my way, unless you want me to drop you the way I dropped Clayton."

Fane's teeth flashed when he grinned. He stepped aside. "Careful, Aurora, I might take you down with me."

I hurried past him, feeling his smile on my back the entire way. Now I had a whole other reason to avoid gym besides loathing the class.

To think I actually wanted to dance with the scoundrel at winter ball. I'd sooner dance with a viper.

Mom did the final touches on my hair the night of the dance. Having it swept up in a twist made me want to wear my scarf more than ever, but Mom convinced me to leave it for one night.

"The wound has nearly faded."

"Has it?" I asked absently.

"What about a necklace instead?"

I suppose a winter scarf didn't exactly go with my short black dress. I opted for a choker on a thick velvet ribbon. I needed something on my neck.

Mom had on her happy face. I looked at her reflection in the mirror beside me rather than my own.

"You look beautiful. The boys are going to be sorry they didn't ask you to the dance."

I found myself smiling back at her.

In the past, Denise and I arrived right on time to dances. Tonight I asked my Mom drive me two hours into winter ball.

I wasn't the only one arriving late. Two senior couples meandered over the shoveled path leading to the school. When they opened the double doors, music blew out like a beckoning force and sucked us inside.

"Hi, Aurora!" Senior class president Susan Miller greeted me from the table where she was set up with a cash box.

I handed her six bucks, which she stuffed inside a metal box.

She stamped a blue snowflake onto the back of my hand. "Have fun."

Music thumped inside the student center. There was already a large group dancing, including Denise and Alan Baxter. I wove through the rocking mass and made my way to the core, where I could dance unnoticed and twist my body to the rhythm of the beat.

Emily Horton was grinding against Clayton Wilcox. Weird. I thought she and Scott were together. I didn't notice him in the cluster of celebrated seniors.

I closed my eyes, ran my hands down my body, and threw my head back. I swayed side to side, inching my way to the floor. When I'd reached the ground I made my way slowly back up.

When I opened my eyes I saw Denise look over then quickly away.

A disco ball spun in slow circles overhead, sending fractured light over the students below. I danced until my throat went dry. When I'd had enough, I abruptly stopped and pushed my way out in the middle of a song.

The line in front of the refreshment table barely moved, so I bailed in favor of the water fountain. After I stood and licked a drop of water from my lips, I noticed Scott Stevens leaning against the wall, arms folded.

"Hi, Scott."

It was a beautiful thing to see a boy's face change so quickly. Scott brightened when he smiled. "Hey, Aurora. How's it going?"

"You know. It's going. How 'bout you?"

"Yeah," he said.

I looked over at the students dancing. "Aren't you here with Emily Horton?"

Scott half-laughed, half-grunted. "Sort of."

"Why is she dancing with Clayton?"

"She's trying to make me jealous."

I flashed Scott a smile. "Want to give her a taste of her own medicine?"

He hesitated for only a second. "Would you like to dance?"

I put my arm around his in answer. Scott led us toward the gathered mass. He pushed through the dancing bodies, bringing us by the speakers and most popular kids at Denali. The couples in this section ground against each other. Scott danced about a foot from me until I stepped forward and put my hands around his neck. Scott required no further encouragement. His hands slid over my hips. He thrust himself at me in tempo with the music—a beat that pulsed as wildly as his body.

Classmates glanced our way. This was my moment: Aurora Sky dancing with Scott Stevens. I was high on a cloud.

I didn't even care when Emily confronted us during a slow dance.

"Scott, what the hell is this?" She stood beside us, brandishing an unattractive scowl.

"I'm dancing with Aurora Sky. What does it look like?"

"It looks like you forgot you came with a date."

Scott didn't let go of me. "So you can go off and dance with other people, but I can't?"

Emily glanced at the small audience taking in the scene. "Fine," she said. "You know what? I'll find someone else to give me a ride home while I'm at it."

By the time the deejay announced the last song of the night, Emily had stormed off with Clayton. She got the short end of the stick in my opinion. Literally. Clayton Wilcox barely reached five four.

The speakers stopped pounding as a lulling slow song drifted over the student body. Scott pulled me closer. I'd never had a guy's arms around me like that. It felt good.

Now that the last slow song of the night was playing, only couples remained on the dance floor. The girls wrapped their arms around their guys, eyes half closed on a sigh.

"Sorry about your date," I murmured against Scott's chest.

I felt Scott shrug. "Don't worry about it. Emily wanted to break up last week, but postponed because of winter ball."

"Timing's everything."

Scott laughed softly. "Anyway, the dance turned out good." He stopped rocking and leaned back. "I bet you didn't know that I've had a crush on you since the beginning of the year."

"Me?"

Scott's cheeks dimpled. "Yeah, you, Aurora Sky."

I wished I still had my head against his shoulder so he wouldn't see me blush.

Scott's voice turned to a whisper. "You're so beautiful when you smile."

He took my head in his hands and leaned in.

Hallelujah! Scott Stevens was about to kiss me.

I parted my lips slowly. Scott opened wide.

Be cool, Aurora. I'd die of embarrassment if he figured out this was my first kiss.

It was pretty simple, my lips needed to touch his. But when I leaned forward, rather than make contact, my mouth went inside Scott's. His lips moved all over me. He wasn't kissing, so much as sucking my face.

This couldn't be right. Not Scott Stevens. He was the basketball captain. He'd had girlfriends since like the sixth grade.

His tongue joined the action, drenching the lower half of my face in a saliva bath.

The vampire lunatic appeared in my head without warning. I could feel his clammy lips over me.

No, not now. Nothing would ruin my first kiss. Not bad memories or sloppy mechanics. I just needed to get in the game.

I mashed my lips against Scott's…teeth. He took my lower lip between his own and ran his tongue along the edge.

I closed my eyes and pictured Scott's face, his dimples, his deep brown eyes and thick lashes.

A murmur worked its way up Scott's throat. He liked the kiss. Maybe my expectations were too high.

We pulled apart after the music stopped. The last of the lingering couples headed out of the student center when the lights came on. Scott stood in place staring at me. It made me feel bashful all over again. He ran a hand through his hair.

"That was really unexpected," he said.

"Tell me about it."

When our eyes met we laughed. Scott's shoulders relaxed.

"Look, I really like you. I'd like to hang out again."

"Me, too," I said.

This put a big smile over Scott's face. He cleared his throat.

"I know this is really soon, but my parents are out of town this weekend…if you want to come over and hang out."

Yeah, sure, why wouldn't I? Just Scott Stevens and me, alone in his house.

The kiss would be better if we had more time and privacy. We could get to know each other better.

"Sure."

"Do you want me to pick you up tomorrow?"

I was no longer looking at Scott when I spoke, but far into the distance at the flashes of color and sequin as the last of our classmates exited the school.

"No, I'll take the bus. What time do you want me to come over?"

"Anytime you want."

The way he said it all cute and eager made me smile again.

“How about later?” I asked. “Like four o’clock?”
Scott set a hand on my cheek. “Can’t wait.”

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10
No Turning Back

I hadn't looked at my list of resolutions since orientation. Saturday morning, I set the list on my desk, pulled the cap off my pen, and slashed through two more. Then I stared at the words until my vision blurred.

kill first vampire
get drunk
kiss a boy
lose virginity

One more to go.

That night I had laid awake thinking.

I almost died a virgin. I mean, what experience was more life altering than sex?

It's true that getting drunk and being kissed weren't the great experiences I thought they'd be, but sex had to be different. It had to be better. Scratch that. It had to be like no other physical sensation known to mankind.

There was only one way to find out.

Scott was as good a candidate as anyone. I liked him. He liked me.

Wasn't that how it worked?

There was only one way to find out.

When I came down to breakfast, I cleared my throat. "I'm going over to a friend's."

Mom stood behind the kitchen counter, pouring a can of Diet Coke into a glass filled with ice.

She turned around. "Which friend's?"

"Her name's Noel."

Mom's shoulders relaxed. "Noel. That's a nice name. How come you've never mentioned her before?"

"We just met."

"Will you be back for dinner?"

"No."

"Can I have your friend's phone number?"

"Mom, I have a cell."

"You don't always answer it."

"Fine."

I jotted down Noel's number on the back of an envelope and slapped it onto the counter.

Mom followed me into the entryway and watched as I wrapped first my red scarf around my neck and then put on my coat.

"Where does Noel live?"

"By school."

Finally Mom's face relaxed. "Call me if you need a ride home. Have fun with your friend."

"Thanks," I said quickly. "Bye."

I called Noel on my way down the hill and asked her to cover for me if my mom called.

When Noel starting asking questions I told her I had to go. If she knew what I was up to she might try to cheer me on or talk me out of it. I had my mind made up.

To get to Scott's neighborhood, I needed to take the bus that picked up across the street. At least I had my pick of seats, it being Saturday afternoon and all.

Halfway to Scott's house, I pulled the bus cord. A moment later, the tires slowed and came to a grinding halt beside Jewel Lake Quickie Mart.

It sorta sucked getting off and having to wait again, but I wasn't in any real hurry, and best to come prepared.

The parking lot was empty except for two cars, thank god. It was warm inside the minimart, unlike the public bus.

I passed the chips and candy aisle and found condoms at the end of a row beside a section of toiletries. I didn't stop to read the labels or anything; I just grabbed a box of Trojans and headed to the checkout counter.

There was no line, but the cashier was on the phone.

I set the box down and stared at the tangle of brown hair streaming down the cashier's back.

Someone threw a pack of American Spirits beside the box of condoms. I glanced over, only to see Fane Donado standing next to me.

My stomach flopped down to my feet. Luckily I managed to keep cool.

I arched a challenging brow. "See something interesting?"

Fane reached over. At first I thought he was going for the box of Trojans, but he pulled gently on my scarf instead. The gesture took me aback. I didn't know how he got so close to me.

"I like your scarf."

I lifted my chin. "Thanks. Apparently red's my color."

A smile quirked over Fane's mouth. He nodded toward the box on the check stand. "Who's the prince who sent his girl in to fetch his rubbers?"

I pressed my lips together and concentrated on the register.

Fane leaned closer and spoke inside my ear. "I wouldn't want anyone to know the name of the wuss I was banging, either."

My eyes sparked. I turned until I was face-to-face with Fane. He thought he was so badass and grown up. He thought he understood pain and darkness. He probably even thought I was fumbling around with some science geek who spent his lunch hour in lab.

I straightened up. "Not that it's any of your business, but I'm on my way

to hang out with Scott Stevens."

"Right, then," Fane said. "I can see how someone in your shoes might find that numbnut attractive."

I laughed. I couldn't help it. "Did you seriously just use the word 'numbnut'?"

"That'll be six thirty-five."

I didn't notice the clerk swiping the box of Trojans under the scanner. I dug out my wallet, pulled out a ten, and handed it to the cashier.

"I don't need a bag," I said.

I felt Fane's eyes all over me. His voice dropped. "This won't make him love you, you know."

So now he thought *I* was the numbnut. I turned my head slowly. When my eyes met his I almost willed him to stop me.

Who was I kidding? The last person who would ever care about my welfare was Fane Donado. I was nothing to him, and he certainly wasn't anything to me other than an ill-timed annoyance.

I grabbed the box of condoms. "I'm not looking for a soul mate."

I pushed through the doors and walked briskly through the parking lot to the bus stop. I opened the box of Trojans and shoved the individually wrapped condoms inside my coat pocket before dumping the box inside a wastebasket cemented to the sidewalk. I jammed my hands inside my pockets and ran a thumb over the foil. My teeth began to chatter.

Fane pulled up alongside the bus stop in his ugly heap of a car. He leaned over and rolled down the passenger window by hand.

"Get in. I'll give you a lift home."

What a jerk. He acted like Mr. Nice in Valerie's absence, then the moment she entered the scene I ceased to exist. I couldn't believe I ever wanted to kiss those mismatched lips. From what I'd seen he was just as sloppy as Scott and way less pleasing on the eyes.

"I'm not going home!" I snapped. "And I would never get inside a car with you."

"What's the matter, Aurora? Afraid I'll bite?"

That got my attention. Something odd and unsettling fluttered inside my chest. I snapped my head in Fane's direction. He smiled, and his teeth gleamed. A shudder worked its way down my spine to my toes.

I sucked in a breath. "Thanks for the offer, but my bus will be here any minute."

Fane's grin widened. His car inched away, but not before Fane pierced me with one last shaded look. "Suit yourself. Be safe, Aurora Sky."

Scott lived in a picturesque neighborhood three blocks from the bus stop. Small white lights glowed along fence railings, bushes, and rooftops. Every

now and then, I'd pass a household that hadn't gotten around to removing their Christmas decorations.

I walked in the street because snow covered the sidewalks. Along the way, I slipped a couple condoms from my coat pocket into my jeans.

I didn't need to check the number on the two-story house with the French windows. Scott's Dodge Ram was parked in the drive. I marched up to the front steps and pounded on the door.

I believed that once a decision was made it should be carried out without hesitation. And shouldn't I feel fortunate to share my first time with my number one crush? But that was part of the problem. That crush belonged to the old Aurora Sky.

An image of Fane appeared in my head. I shoved it back out.

When Scott opened the door, he smiled and asked me inside. He was wearing jeans and a white T-shirt. I pulled my arms out of my jacket as I walked inside. When Scott didn't offer to take my coat, I tossed it onto the nearest chair.

Scott nodded at my neck. "Want to take off your scarf?"

"Not right now."

The living room furniture was all dark wood with burgundy upholstery. I avoided stepping on the brown bear hide pancaked to the floor. The head stuck up off the floorboards facing the TV.

I nodded to the rug. "That's gross."

Scott flashed a toothy smile. "Isn't it great? My dad shot it."

I passed the head of a mountain goat mounted to the wall. "Can we go someplace else?"

"How about my room?"

"Sure."

I followed Scott down the hall, but stopped as he led me past the kitchen.

"Do you have anything to drink?" I asked.

He turned and grinned. "You mean like beer?"

"Do you have anything stronger?"

"I can make a rum and Coke."

"Sure."

Apparently, Scott's mom had a thing for roosters. They were on all the kitchen towels and the set of ceramic jars lined on the counter by the stove. There was a rooster on the switch plate cover, kitchen mat, and clock. The only thing missing was a stuffed rooster head coming out of the wall.

"How about vodka? Got any of that?" I sat on a stool at the counter listening to the clink of bottles as Scott rummaged through his parents' liquor cabinet.

"Yep, lots of vodka." He set the bottle in front of me, reached for two shot glasses, and filled them to the brim.

I lifted my glass. "To the last semester."

Scoot grinned. He threw back his shot glass and emptied it in one gulp.

I did the same then coughed and sputtered. “Ick!”

Scott rocked with laughter.

I grinned, too. “That’s awful.”

Scott laughed harder. I pushed my glass toward him. “Give me more.”

“More?”

“More.”

“You’re really cool, you know? I always figured you for a goody two-shoes.”

I rolled my eyes. “Just pour, already.”

The next shot didn’t go down any easier. I coughed and waved a hand in front of my face. “Obviously people don’t drink it for the taste.”

“Usually you mix it with something. We have Kahlua.”

“I’ll take it straight.”

Maybe the third one would do the trick. Wasn’t the guy supposed to be the one getting the girl plastered so she’d sleep with him? Women had to do everything these days.

The fifth shot finally hit me. I don’t think it was the quantity as much as the timing. I was downing them so fast the alcohol hadn’t had a chance to catch up until now. I gripped the counter and grinned.

“So let’s see your room.”

I felt all warm and tingly inside. It was the only way. Otherwise I’d back out.

I’d passed through the hunting lodge and farm house. I could hardly wait to see Scott’s room, but it was like entering the sports zone. The walls were covered in baseball and basketball posters. He’d nailed up blue and white Denali flags and the letters he’d earned playing on the team.

His walls were like a tacky, four-sided collage.

Shorts and balled-up white and gray-edged socks littered the floor. School books were tossed in a corner. A pair of jeans stretched across a chair.

No tidying up for company.

The bed wasn’t made. Big surprise.

“What do you wanna do?” Scott asked.

“It,” I said before bursting into a fit of giggles. “I want to do it.”

I was in hysterics now. Scott was laughing, too.

What a fun guy. He was really fun.

I closed my eyes for a second and felt the world spin circles. The weirdest part was everything stayed in place when I reopened them.

Closed. Spinning.

Opened. Fine.

Scott closed his bedroom door and I doubled over laughing again.

“What?”

I tried to answer and ended up snorting. As soon as I caught my breath I said, “Why did you close your door when nobody’s home?”

Scott’s cheeks dimpled. His shoulders shook when he laughed, but he

wasn't laughing anywhere near as hard as me.

I stopped suddenly and looked at Scott. "I almost died a virgin. Can you think of anything more tragic than that?"

Scott scratched his head. "Yeah, that would have really sucked."

I can't believe I ever found Scott intimidating. He was so easy to talk to.

I took a step toward him, wobbling on the second and third.

"Whoa, there," Scott said, catching me.

I liked his arms. They felt good, especially when he stroked my back.

"I don't want to take any more chances," I said.

"Aurora, are you sure?"

"Sure I'm sure," I said, making myself laugh again.

Scott stopped stroking my back and took my head in his hands. He pulled me forward and put his mouth over mine.

Finally, he was taking charge…if only his wet lips weren't plastered over mine. I reached down for the fly on his pants.

I was tired of feeling dead inside. I wanted someone to wake me up.

Scott reached for my zipper. He didn't fumble, I'd give him that. He got me unbuttoned and unzipped in no time. I had on a pair of black lace underwear. I mean, if a boy was about to see them, black was the way to go. Scott finished where I'd left off, releasing the top button of his jeans.

He maneuvered me onto his bed. I scooted all the way on top and stretched out over the tangled sheets. Scott climbed over me on all fours. His expression was serious. Laughter bubbled up my throat, so I bit my tongue.

"Oh, I've got these." I dug the condoms out of my pocket and held them up.

Scott took one. I dropped the extra somewhere in the sheets and stared at the ceiling while Scott pulled down his briefs and put the condom on. I knew when he was finished because the bed shifted and he loomed over me.

I wasn't liking that position.

Scott pulled down my panties. I clenched instinctively, which made it difficult for him to shove his way in. The procedure was slow and excruciating. Pain arched over my pelvis. I tried to make my scream sound like one of pleasure rather than agony when Scott made it in.

The rubbing was like acid over a raw wound.

Maybe if I acted like I was enjoying it he'd hurry up and finish. I pushed myself against him a couple times and, thankfully, he blew his load in a matter of seconds. When he pulled out, it felt like a knife being yanked from my body.

I rolled off the bed and pulled my underwear and pants up. "Where's your bathroom?"

"Down the hall."

I staggered down the hall and locked myself inside.

I lowered the toilet seat before yanking down my pants and underwear. I sat staring at the bathtub. Slowly, I ripped off several squares of toilet paper

and dabbed gingerly between my legs. When I peeked at the tissue, it was stained with blood. I dropped it into the toilet bowl and ripped off more paper, dabbing until there wasn't a trace of blood. Then I flushed it down, washed my hands, and returned to Scott's room.

Scott launched an inflatable basketball into a mini wall-mounted basketball hoop. The ball made it into the hoop and landed inside a laundry hamper beneath.

He grinned at me. "Now you don't have to worry about dying a virgin."

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11
Fight

For the first time since the accident, I could see my reflection clearly. The girl looking back was pale as death. She wore a plaid miniskirt exposing her long, lean, ghost flesh.

I felt like Sally in The Nightmare Before Christmas, minus the stitches. My only visible imperfections were hidden under my shirt and scarf.

"Aurora!" Mom hollered up the stairs. "If you don't leave now you're going to miss the school bus!"

I made my way down and grabbed my backpack off the living room floor. Mom stared at me in horror. "You're not going to school dressed like that?"

"Dressed like what?" I challenged.

Mom looked me over from head to foot. I had on a tight white blouse tied in a knot at my midriff. There were no tights beneath my skirt, just a short pair of white socks and black Mary Janes.

"You look like a…like a…"

"School girl," I offered. I threaded my arms under the straps of my pack and hoisted it on my back.

She grimaced. "I was going to say stripper."

I laughed. "Wow, really? Maybe secret agent isn't my only calling in life."

I headed to the door without looking back.

"Don't forget your coat!" Mom yelled.

"Got my scarf," I answered, tightening it around my neck. "That's all I need."

"Aurora."

"Gotta go."

I was in no hurry to reach my locker, especially when I saw Denise and Erin together. They stuffed textbooks from their backpacks to their lockers. As I neared, they looked my way then leaned together before setting off rapidly down the hall.

An arm looped around mine. The touch was light. I had a good idea whose it was.

I smiled. "Hey, Noel. I was just on my way to see if you guys were in the library."

"Never mind the library," Noel said. "Want to tell me what you were

doing this weekend that involved me covering for you?"

"Did my mom call?"

"No. Let's go in here." Noel pulled me inside the nearest ladies' room. She had a bun high on each side of her head. Her long bangs were split down the middle, hanging down her face. Every article of Noel's clothing was black, right down to her top, skirt, nylons, and knee-high combat boots. She wore a stomach cincher over her clothes, tied tight in order to stay in place around her skinny torso.

Noel was studying my apparel as closely as I reviewed hers. "We should really talk about your wardrobe. Are you planning on joining the pep squad?"

I laughed. "Only if I get to cheer for Team Wicked."

A freshman glanced at us and hurried out.

"I think you scared her away," Noel said.

"Sure, *I* scared her."

"So out with the dirty details already. Did you go vamping without us?"

"Whatever." I set my backpack on the floor. I made a quick scan under the stalls and seeing them foot-free, turned to Noel. "I hooked up is all."

Noel's eyes bugged out. "With a vampire?"

My lip curled back. "No!"

"Let me see your neck."

I rolled my eyes and pulled down my scarf. "See?"

"Wrists."

I turned my arms over and held them in front of Noel. "Satisfied?"

She hoisted herself onto the bathroom counter, crossed her legs, and began swinging them. "So who'd you hook up with?"

"Scott Stevens."

Noel stopped swinging her legs and wrinkled her nose.

"What?"

"Nothing. Interesting choice."

"Why?"

"It's just you're so coffee and he's so…herbal tea. So, you had sex?" Noel began swinging her legs again.

"Um-hmm."

"How was he?"

"Horrible," I said without thinking.

The leg swinging stopped again. Noel stared at me wide-eyed right before bursting into peals of laughter.

I started to smile. "I guess it is kind of funny. What a dope he turned out to be."

Noel laughed harder.

"And that's not the worst of it…" I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror and looked away. "He was my first."

Noel instantly stopped laughing. She jumped off the counter. "Oh, fuck," she said right before throwing her arms around me.

I patted her back even though she was the one trying to comfort me.

"It's all right, really. I mean, the first time's supposed to suck, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Noel said, pulling back. "It hurts like hell."

"I guess I didn't get drunk enough."

"You won't need to next time."

"Right, like I'd do that again."

Noel raised her brows. "Famous last words." She walked to the bathroom door. "Think we can make it to the library without being caught?"

"It beats spending second period in the water closet."

"Let's go."

Noel and I walked down the middle of the hallway toward the library.

Noel nudged my shoulder. "You should come out with Whitney, Hope, and me next time. We'll show you who to avoid and who knows how to nibble on a girl just right."

"Eh," I answered without enthusiasm.

That's the problem with vampires. They didn't nibble; they chomped.

A fight broke out inside the cafeteria as I passed at the end of the day.

A month earlier, I would have walked in the opposite direction instead of pushing my way through the double doors to get a closer look.

One quick peek and then I'd catch my school bus.

The expressions on surrounding students morphed from resigned boredom to anticipated glee. We surged forward—the sound like a riptide pulling us in.

Students were cheering.

"Get him, Jason!"

"Knock that pansy to the ground."

The taller guy, Jason, got the shorter guy into a headlock and pounded his face.

I didn't recognize either student. They were just two more nameless hooligans going about the motions, which at the moment involved swinging fists.

A month earlier, I would have walked in the opposite direction instead of pushing my way closer until I was at the front of the horde encircling the boys.

"Stop!" the shorter boy yelled.

"Don't stop! Hit him, Jason! Harder!" the crowd screamed back. This was followed by an obliging smack against the smaller boy's face.

"Enough!" shorty yelled.

"You sure? You learn your lesson yet?"

"Yeah, I'm sorry. You can stop. Stop already!"

Jason pushed the boy forward and lifted his hands over his head in

victory. His victim stumbled and nearly fell face first onto the squeaky cafeteria floor. The crowd began to disperse. I was planted to the ground, unable to move.

Something wasn't right. A warning whispered up my spine.

A look of murder settled deep within the beaten boy's eye sockets. He staggered upright then walked to the nearest table. Shorty didn't look dangerous. He was small and moved slowly. But to see his expression…it was unmistakable.

He grabbed a fold-up chair and lifted it above his head. Jason never saw him coming. The smaller boy approached silently from behind and slammed the chair over Jason's head.

I heard nothing. Sound ceased to exist. Blood sprayed the floor, landing in round droplets. It stained the ground inches from my black Mary Janes. I looked up and saw Fane in the crowd staring at the blood with an expression of enrapture. I should have been disgusted, but when I looked at the blood again I felt something stir inside me.

Jason lay flat on the floor. He wasn't moving.

The collected student population was momentarily gagged. The boy started toward Jason, chair still in hand. He'd kill Jason. He'd kill him and no one would do a thing to stop him. But I could.

I stepped in Shorty's path and yanked the metal seat from his fingers. I threw it aside. Sound returned like the clash of cymbals when the chair clattered to the ground. Something snapped inside me. I grabbed the boy by the hair and kneed him in the gut. He grunted in pain. His agony filled my ears like a sweet melody. I turned and jabbed my elbow into his ribcage. My skirt lifted several inches as I twisted into the punch.

The boy howled. He couldn't manage to fight back. He was too busy shielding himself from my blows.

Suddenly I was falling backward, being yanked from behind. I struggled and slapped at the hands that had latched onto my midriff.

"That's enough, young lady!"

Mr. Burke, my old biology teacher, stood frowning at me.

"All right, all right," I said, dusting myself off. "You're welcome!"

"Let's go," Mr. Burke said. "Principal's office."

The last thing I saw were the whites of Fane's teeth as he grinned. A month earlier I wasn't so much as a blip on that boy's radar. Now he was everywhere, appearing at my worst moments, like Satan witnessing my fall from grace.

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12
The Ultimate Baddie

By the time Principal Romero finished suspending me, the school had all but emptied out. I slipped on my backpack, which sagged down to the exposed skin on my lower back. I pushed open one of the front doors and stepped outside. It was like walking into a freezer.

A rich velvet voice caused a second wave of shivers to ripple through my body.

"My, my. Someone's on a downward spiral."

I would have rather ignored the sensation his murmur stirred inside my stomach. I turned my head to the side. Fane leaned against the brick wall, one knee bent and foot planted against the building, smoking a cigarette.

I rolled my eyes. "Who, me?"

"What's the punishment for first-time offenders these days—a slap on the wrist and a warning?"

"Three days suspension."

"Crash and burn, baby." Fane flicked his cigarette to the ground and smashed it into the packed snow with the heel of his boot. "Your yellow school bus is long gone."

"So I'll walk," I said.

Fane looked me up and down. "Wearing that? You'll have hypothermia before you reach home."

"Well, then, the doctors can revive me and bring me back to life. It's amazing what modern medicine is capable of," I said.

Fane chuckled. "Well, aren't you jaded."

"Are you laughing at me?"

"Not me. Come on, I'll give you a ride."

"You know I won't get inside a car with you."

"Is it me or the car?"

"Both."

"What about lover boy? Would you get inside his truck?"

I glared at Fane. "No."

"I didn't think so. Come on."

"I told you…"

"I'll walk you to the bus stop."

"Whatever."

It must have been the sharp contrast between Fane and the freshly fallen snow that made him appear so overtly dark as he moved in sync by my side. He followed me inside the open Plexiglas shelter and stood in silence, as though he were my own personal bodyguard. The agents didn't mention anything about issuing one of those.

"You don't have to wait with me, you know." I fought back the urge to shiver. It would be a bit like crying in front of him.

Nevertheless, he took off his long leather jacket and held it open for me.

"What are you doing?"

"You're cold."

"So?"

"So put on my jacket."

My mind must have gone numb in the cold because I let Fane to slip the jacket on me without further protest. I anticipated Fane's warmth enfolding me, but the coat was as cold as a corpse.

"Brrr!" I snapped. "I might actually feel colder in this jacket."

Fane's ego showed no sign of injury. "You'll warm up. At least you look better."

My ego was another matter. "What do you mean I look better?"

"I mean that slip of a skirt. You look like some prissy airhead. The coat makes you look cool, like Trinity in *The Matrix*."

My cheeks heated. "You know what? You can have your damn jacket back."

I yanked my arms out of the sleeves and thrust the coat in a wad against Fane's chest.

He didn't say a word as he shook out the jacket and put it back on. While he was doing that, I untied the knot in my blouse and smoothed the top over my exposed midriff, buttoning it at the bottom. I hugged my arms around my chest.

Fane lit a cigarette. The first puff of smoke drifted by like a breath in the cold air. "Why are you so angry?"

I could ignore him or even act the airhead and play dumb, but Fane was the first person to bother asking.

I dropped my arms. "What do you care?"

"I'm curious."

I leaned against the Plexiglas and sighed. "I had my whole life ahead of me. I was going to get out of here and start my own life. I'm only eighteen, and I'll never get to do any of that now."

Fane arched a brow. "You talk as though you were dead."

"I might as well be." My nose started running. I sniffed and rubbed my bridge.

"So what's the hitch? How come your life's come to a sudden and conclusive end?"

I opened and closed my mouth, unsure how to answer. "Medical bills," I blurted. "I can't leave the state to go to college because of all my medical bills."

"A lot of kids don't get a chance to go to college at all."

"You don't get it! All I've ever wanted is to get out of here."

"So go. Take a road trip, pick fruit in Australia, backpack across Europe,

volunteer in Africa, join the circus…whatever."

I stomped my foot. "You're not helping!"

Fane grinned. "You see? It's not the end of the world."

I walked out of the enclosure and looked over the schedule posted against the bus sign. "God, transportation sucks in this city. You're lucky if a bus comes along every hour."

"I could take you home right now."

"Thanks, but the bus feels safer."

"Want a smoke?"

I looked at the cigarette in Fane's outstretched hand and laughed. "No! God, what are you? The dark prince of temptation?"

I could feel my heart pitter against my chest when Fane smiled at me next. "I like that. It's clever. You're a very interesting girl."

"Well, it's good to know I'm not a complete airhead."

"I don't think you're an airhead at all. You just look like one."

"Thanks!" I yelled.

I glanced at Fane's lips as he took another drag on his cigarette. I rarely got a chance to look at him up close. From here I could trace the outline of his abs through the opening in his jacket. His eyes were a rich, dreamy brown and fully focused when he looked at me.

Fane lowered the cigarette and pointed it at me. "I do like your legs."

Despite the cold, my cheeks heated and were quite possibly the only warm part on my entire body. The cold had officially gone to my brain.

"These pasty things?"

"Pale. Ivory. Silk." Each word was like a caress. "Your skin is a thing of beauty."

I trembled, and it had nothing to do with the cold.

The tip of Fane's cigarette turned to ash as he held it by his side. Before it broke off, Fane flicked the cigarette into the street without looking. He reached inside his pocket and popped something inside his mouth. I heard him suck and swallow. He repeated the sound.

Fane was not Scott. He'd eat me alive.

A bus appeared in the distance. Maybe it was mine. God, I hoped it was. I'd get on even if it wasn't.

I passed Fane without meeting his eye and pulled my wallet from the front pocket of my backpack. I slung the pack over my shoulder and only looked at him when the bus was coming to a stop.

"Thanks for the company," I said quickly.

I pitched myself inside the bus the moment the doors opened. Heat engulfed me. The abrupt change in temperature caused my skin to itch uncomfortably. I deposited my coins beside the driver and walked down the aisle toward the back of the bus.

I tossed my pack onto a seat in back. I had the last six rows to myself. I smoothed my skirt back as I sat. I should have felt relieved instead of

disappointed by his absence.

Relief arrived when Fane boarded the bus. The achiness was another matter.

When he walked toward me, I felt something familiar and terrifying. He took each step slowly as though he had all the time in the world.

The bus lurched forward. It had no effect on Fane's footing.

My breath came out ragged, but I concentrated on steadying it as Fane approached.

He smiled wickedly and took the seat beside me.

I waited impatiently for Fane to explain himself, but he didn't say anything. He just sat there all mysterious and cocksure of himself. I looked sideways at the smooth line of his jaw. His cheeks were slightly sunken in. He had a proud and well-proportioned nose.

Then there were his infamous lips—the upper one slightly smaller than the bottom. The tongue I imagined touching them was now my own.

The bus plowed over a snow berm and jolted me in my seat. I willed Fane to touch me, but he sat facing forward as though he were nothing more than a commuter.

And they said girls were teases. I couldn't take it anymore.

I flipped my leg over his and straddled him in his seat. Before Fane could make some glib comment about how I'd become the ultimate baddie, I kissed his lips into silence. His mouth tasted like menthol.

That broke the spell of passivity. Fane lifted me by the hips and seated me over his groin. My lower legs pressed against the plastic bus seat. Fane pulled my head toward him and drew kisses from me as though he planned to suck every last breath out of my lungs.

The thrill of him was maddening. I tried to widen my mouth, but he closed it with his own lips in a succession of intoxicating kisses that made me lightheaded. Fane kissed like he knew exactly what he was doing. He kissed like he'd kissed a hundred times before. I tried to keep up.

I felt like someone else. Aurora Sky didn't straddle vagrants on public buses and stick her tongue down their throats. Yet here I was grinding against him, relishing every intake of breath.

My skirt was spread wide open. I felt his rough jeans against my panties.

Fane pushed my hair back when it fell into my face. I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him harder.

He slid his fingers beneath the pleated fabric and spread his fingertips across my thigh.

"I changed my mind," Fane said between kisses. "I like the skirt."

A chime rang down the hollow of the bus. I pulled my lips off Fane's and looked out the window. We'd already turned the corner on Jewel Lake Road.

My words sounded breathless. "My street's coming up."

I slid back and planted my feet on the ground, pausing when I stood above Fane.

He flashed me the Cheshire grin.

I wrapped my fingers around a pole and steadied myself as I reached for the cord above the windows. I yanked down harder than intended. I grabbed my pack and slung it over my shoulder.

As the bus slowed, Fane locked eyes with me. He held me in a trance.

“This is my stop,” I said.

The bus ground to a halt yet I couldn’t look away.

Fane crossed one leg over the other and leaned back. He propped an elbow against the window ledge, his arm dangling over my abandoned seat.

“Don’t worry, Aurora Sky. You don’t have to invite me home.” His teeth flashed when he grinned. “Yet.”

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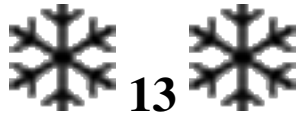

13
Suspension

Mom waited in the kitchen, poised with her arms crossed, back to the counter, angled so the frown on her face was the first thing I saw when I walked in. I wondered how long she'd held that pose.

She began with a calm voice. "Do you want to tell me about getting sent to the principal's office after school?"

I slipped out of my backpack. "You'd think he would have given me a medal rather than suspend me from school."

Mom didn't smile. "Mind telling me why you got into a fight?"

"*I* didn't get in a fight. I intervened. I already went over this with Principal Romero. That kid was about to kill the other one, and I stopped him."

"Principal Romero said you beat on him."

"Well, it put an end to his rampage, didn't it?" I crossed the kitchen, opened the freezer, and frowned. "No more fruity pops?"

"Aurora, I'm talking to you."

"I can snack and listen." I opened the cupboard and pulled out a bag of pretzels instead.

"Aurora, I'm extremely disappointed."

I stopped mid-chew and looked at her. "Well, I'm sorry. I was recruited to fight. This is who I am now. It's what they expect from me."

"Agent Melcher said you could go back to your normal life."

"Right, Agent Melcher." I sneered. The pretzel sticks made me think of small bones snapping under my teeth. I chucked the bag onto the counter. "I don't get to make my own decisions anymore."

My mother's face dropped. "Maybe they'll reconsider in a year."

"Mom," I said firmly. "They'll never let me go." I grabbed an apple out of the glass fruit bowl on the counter and headed up the stairs.

"Where are you going now?" Mom asked.

"To get started on homework." I chuckled at the surprise on her face. "Much as I despise the idea of attending the UAA next year, I loathe the thought of repeating senior year at Denali even more."

And that was the truth. I could only play the recovering accident victim for so long before my teachers started expecting more participation on my part.

The upside of suspension was it forced me to stay in one spot and get my

work done. No Mouseketeers. No Skipping. No Fane.

I'd already crammed more studying into one morning than I did during a whole week at Denali.

I joined my mom at the dining room table the next morning and spread my books over the far end. A plate of toast and a glass of pulpy orange juice sat by my side.

"I'm glad you're making this time count," Mom said. "Are you sure I can't make you breakfast?"

"Mom, I'm fine."

I'd never really been sure what my mom did while I was at school. To start the day, it seemed, she read the newspaper with a glass of diet soda.

An hour later, my mom got up, put her glass in the dishwasher, and took the paper in the recycle bin. She disappeared upstairs for a while then returned fully dressed with freshly applied makeup.

"I'm going to the grocery store. I'll be right back. Do you want anything?"

"More fruity pops," I suggested.

The solitude was nice. For the first time since the accident, I got work done. The sub sandwiches Mom brought back for lunch were a welcome break, regardless of the way the bread disintegrated like sponge cake inside my mouth.

The phone rang as my mom finished putting away the groceries.

She answered. "Hello? Yes. May I ask who's calling?"

I stared at my mom. She held the phone against her chest. "Aurora, there's a boy on the phone for you. Fane?"

I leapt out of my chair and grabbed the phone. "Hello?"

"Hello, Aurora."

Even through the phone, his voice was silky.

My mother looked over.

I turned my back and spoke softly. "How did you get my number?"

"I looked it up."

I felt lightheaded in a good way. I wasn't sure if Fane would talk to me, much less call after the kiss. Scott hadn't called and he actually had my phone number.

"How's school?" I asked.

"All the boys are resting easy knowing Aurora Sky's not around to beat them up…for now."

I laughed. "They better not get too comfortable. The school's letting me return on Friday."

"I can't wait."

I gripped the phone around my ear. My heart hammered inside my chest.

"Do you have a piece of paper and pen?" Fane asked.

"Why?"

"I want to give you my phone number."

"Why Fane Donado, are you giving me your digits?" I asked in mock glee.

He chuckled. "Just write it down."

I grabbed a No. 2 pencil and piece of unopened mail from the counter, turning the envelope over to the back. "I'm ready."

Fane recited his cell number.

"Got it."

"Call me anytime."

"During class?" I joked.

"Anytime," Fane repeated.

"All right, see you Friday."

"Until then, Aurora."

My hands shook slightly when I hung up the phone.

"Who is Fane?" Mom asked.

I spun around and smiled innocently. "A boy at school."

"And his name's Fane?"

"Yeah."

"How do you two know each other?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Gym class."

"Aurora, I don't want to see you fall in with a bad crowd."

Laughter bubbled up my throat. "And you're assuming he's a delinquent because of his name?"

"Nice boys don't call themselves *Fane*."

"Yeah, and nice boys aren't always nice, either."

"What do you mean?"

I shook my head. "Nothing, forget it. I'll be in my room."

I tried on five different tops Friday morning before settling on a sweater and skirt that touched my knees.

When I reached school, I avoided C Hall and the risk of running into the Mouseketeers. I wandered the halls until I heard his voice.

"Welcome back."

Instant shiver.

I turned and smiled. I focused on Fane's upper lip, the one that was slightly smaller. Seeing him grin made me want to kiss him again.

"Aurora Sky," those lips said. "I want to show you something."

"What?"

"Come with me."

We walked side by side down the empty hall and out the doors into the student parking lot. The cold bit into my bare flesh. Fane led me to a familiar Pontiac Catalina.

"This is my car."

I folded my arms over my chest.

Fane planted a boot on the bumper. "This thing's a tank."

I looked it over. "It's certainly ugly enough to be."

"Very funny, but it could go through a brick wall and still hold its shape. Last year, this woman in a Dodge Neon ran headfirst into me in her sedan. Wasn't her fault, really, she was skidding on ice."

My eyes widened.

"Don't worry," Fane said. "She walked out of it just fine. But her car…" Fane shook his head. "That thing crumpled like an accordion." He moved his hands together to demonstrate.

A smile spread across my face.

"The tank?" Fane gave it a shove with his boot. "Not a scratch."

"It sounds very safe," I said. As Fane grinned I added quickly, "But I'm still not ready."

"Just know that I'm here for you when you are and, at the risk of my reputation, I'm no speed demon." Fane lowered his voice. "The tank is more of a coaster. She doesn't like going over fifty."

I laughed. "Thanks. I'll remember that."

Fane opened the back door. "Go on, have a seat."

Was he crazy?

"I'm not…"

"We're not going anywhere. I just thought it might help if you eased into the whole auto rehabilitation."

"Is that what they're calling it these days?"

"Step one: Get inside the car."

I smiled and shook my head at his antics, but couldn't resist playing along for the moment. I lowered my head and climbed onto the back bench. The burgundy upholstery was old and torn.

"Where are the seatbelts?"

Fane climbed in after me. "Buried under the seat someplace." He shut the door behind him. "How's this?"

I looked out the side window at the parked cars then out the front overlooking the west side of the school building. I nodded. "Fine for now. What's step two?"

"Step two involves lips—yours and mine. The surest way to get over a car phobia is by creating positive associations."

Hearing the words caused a thrum inside my chest. His lips haunted me. They were wicked. They were wonderful.

Fane twisted one of the fringes at the end of my scarf.

I stared at the red thread wrapped around Fane's finger. "What about Valerie?"

Fane released my scarf. "I broke it off."

"What? When?"

"First thing Tuesday. I told her that she and I had a good run, hoped there

were no hard feelings, and wished her the best."

After one kiss. I should know better than to be a sentimental sap, but my heart was on fire.

"Did you tell her why?"

"I told her I met someone else."

My stomach did a flip-flop. "Did you tell her who?"

Fane chuckled. "As delightful as the spectacle would be, I don't want you two to get into a cat fight in the girls' locker room. Valerie's got claws and I couldn't bear to see so much as a scratch on you."

"Excuse me," I said, sitting up. "Did you not see the way I took down that kid in the cafeteria?"

Fane watched me with an amused half-grin.

I stood on my knees and leaned over him. "Don't let this girl-next-door act fool you, Fane. I'm learning martial arts. I take kickboxing." I stretched my leg over his lap and straddled him. "I could pin you down and keep you down."

Fane looked up at me. "I wouldn't stop you."

He leaned forward as I leaned down. When our lips touched, the world outside his car melted away.

I ran my tongue over his teeth. His back molars were sharp. I retracted my tongue. Fane must have sucked a mint earlier; a hint of peppermint lingered on the tip of his tongue. Our lips moved together softly. I cupped his face in my hands and closed my eyes. Fane ran his hands down my back.

His lips were divine—like soft caresses against my own chapped lips. The windows began to fog, steamed by our heavy breath.

Fane managed to lower me to the bench of the car and cover my body with his own. His hand slipped up my bare thigh, but went no further. He stroked my skin softly. Wave after wave of pleasure rippled through my body.

We stopped kissing. I tilted my head back and closed my eyes. My lips parted slightly. Fane caressed my skin as though touching me was the greatest privilege in the world. I wondered if he was aware of the fact he could do anything to me right then, and I'd let him.

A rumbling engine from a nearby car woke me from my trance. More engines revved until an entire fleet came to life around us.

My eyes opened. "What time is it?"

Fane glanced at his wristwatch. "Eleven thirty."

He sat up when I pushed onto my elbows. "It's already lunch hour?"

There was a glimmer in his eye. "I didn't notice the time passing, either."

I felt dazed when I sat up. I couldn't see out the windows. They were completely fogged and icing over.

"China Garden's nearby," Fane said. "Why don't we walk over, and I'll buy you lunch?"

I smoothed my skirt down my legs, which Fane was admiring rather closely. "Sure, let's go."

We were the only students exiting a car. I spotted Valerie across the lot staring our way. Her eyes narrowed the instant she got over her shock. Sure, I could gloat, but I'd rather forget about her altogether. So much for keeping a low profile.

Fane walked on the outside of the sidewalk and took my hand. It made me grin. I never figured Fane as the hand-holding type.

He reached in his pocket. "Mind if I smoke?"

"Now you're asking?"

"Well, yeah, we're together now."

Together. I grinned so wide I could feel it in my nose.

"Go ahead," I said. "Light one for me, too."

Smoking wasn't on the list of resolutions, but I might as well add it.

Fane chuckled as he pulled his pack of American Spirits out of his coat pocket. "I don't think so."

"What?"

"They're not good for you."

"Oh, and they're good for you?"

"I'm immune." Fane pulled out a cigarette and lit it. He took my hand in his free one again.

"Must be nice."

I squeezed his hand. When he looked at me, I smiled.

The lobby inside China Garden was blissfully quiet. The Denali crowd stuck to McDonald's, Subway, and the supermarket deli. A hostess appeared and led us to a booth behind a bamboo partition. She handed us plastic menus.

"I'll have the vegetable chow mein," I said when a waitress came by to take our orders.

Fane looked across the table. "Are you a vegetarian?"

"Yep, despite my mom's best efforts to 'entice' me into eating meat again."

Fane smiled at the waitress and handed over his menu. "I'll have the same thing."

The waitress nodded and left.

"You don't have to do that," I said.

Fane smiled. "I want to. Besides, I don't really care what I eat."

I shrugged. A smile spread over my cheeks when our eyes locked. I fidgeted on the booth's vinyl bench.

Fane watched me closely. "You're cute."

My cheeks flushed with heat. "What about you?" I asked. "You call me a baddie and it turns out you're Mr. Soft and Fuzzy—a gentleman."

"A gentleman," Fane repeated. His eyes lit up and he laughed. "Mamma would have been so pleased."

I stared at Fane. *Mamma?* In addition to the word he chose, he used a faint Italian accent to say it.

"Does your mom not live in Alaska?"

“My mom is dead.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. It was a long time ago.”

“Oh,” I said again. “Were you very young?”

“It didn’t seem like it at the time, but looking back? Yes, I’d say I was quite young.”

“Hot tea,” our waitress announced. She set down a small white and blue porcelain teapot with two small cups.

Fane poured tea into a cup and pushed it toward me.

“Thanks.” I took a small sip.

“What about you?” Fane asked. “How are things at home? Are they still trying to make you eat cookies?”

I nearly snorted the tea out my nostrils. “I can’t believe you remember that!”

Fane leaned toward me. “How could I forget? You looked like an angel who’d lost her way to heaven.”

I set my teacup down. “I’m no angel.”

And I had the mark of the devil to prove it. Fane seemed pretty dark, but I doubted he’d look at me with the same adoration if he knew I was a secret assassin for the government, engineered to hunt down and kill the reanimated dead. He might even be the type who would feel sorry for vampires. I doubted he had much respect for authority or the government. And somehow, I doubted he would take too kindly to the idea of guys sinking their teeth into me—undead or otherwise.

Luckily, he’d never know that side of me. Superheroes got to have their own separate lives, and my alter ego was no longer all doom and gloom. Who would have guessed that a boy named Fane would have made it feel right again?

When I thought about it more, I was struck by something even more unimaginable.

If I hadn’t gotten into the accident, I never would have gotten to know Fane the way I knew him now. I never would have felt his touch or kissed his lips or seen his smile. And that would have been the real tragedy.

On the way home from school, I stared out the bus window dreamily. The world outside no longer existed. I lived in my own world and I liked it there.

I took great big steps up the hill leading home, skipped up to the front door, and leapt inside. The smile on my lips died when I looked over and saw Mom waiting for me in the front parlor, with Agent Melcher sitting beside her.

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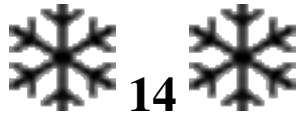

14
Mission North

Melcher must have parked across the street or next door because there'd been no ominous black sedan in the driveway to warn me of his presence. He sat in our armchair in his gray suit. It was the first time I'd seen Melcher without Crist hovering nearby.

I stormed into the center of the room and glared at my mom. "What the hell is he doing here?"

Mom frowned. "Aurora, don't—"

Melcher interrupted with a smile. "Your mother tells me you've been getting into fights and missing class, Aurora."

"So?" I plopped down on the couch and slung one leg over the other.

"I understand transition period is confusing. You're not like the other kids at school anymore. You're special."

Great, just what I needed, Melcher going all student counselor on me. I didn't need a pep talk. I didn't plan on fighting any time soon. I was happy now.

"Do you mind if I have a moment with your daughter, Mrs. Sky?"

Mom stood up immediately. "Of course not. I'll be in the other room if you need me."

I folded my arms over my chest and glared at Melcher.

He sighed and spoke in a low, articulate voice. "You've been called to serve a greater purpose, Aurora. It's frightening at first, I know. We put you face-to-face with evil and you won. You have a gift. A vampire is like any other terrorist target, and we've never been better equipped to win the war on terror. The important thing to remember is they're not human. They're pure evil. I think you're ready for training, Aurora."

"I'm not ready. I have senior year to finish." And a boyfriend who deserved all my free time.

"This won't get in the way of school. I was just explaining to your mother that we've assigned you a mentor. I've chosen Dante for you. I think the two of you will find you have a lot in common."

"So he's a vampire hunter?"

"That's right."

"Fine. Whatever." I stood up. "Thanks for stopping by."

Agent Melcher got up. "Don't mention it. You can expect Dante tomorrow afternoon."

Maybe if Melcher had given us a time to expect Dante, we wouldn't have wasted the better part of Saturday afternoon peering out the window any time we heard a car on the road. Regardless of the wait, it would be nice to meet someone like me.

Finally, shortly after four thirty, the doorbell rang. When Mom opened the door, one of the cutest guys I'd ever seen stood outside. He grinned from ear to ear, his thick brown hair framing a tanned face. His muscular build was tight in all the right places. It didn't matter that his veins were filled with toxic blood—he had a smile that could kill.

"Sky residence, I presume? I'm Dante."

"Come in. Come in," Mom gushed. "Please, have a seat."

My mom wiggled her brows at me the moment Dante's back was turned. He looked around the parlor and settled in the armchair Melcher had occupied the day before, but unlike Melcher, Dante slouched all the way back into the cushions.

"I made cookies. Would you like one?" Mom asked him.

Dante's eyes lit up. "Cookies? You've discovered my weakness, Mrs. Sky."

Mom returned from the kitchen in a matter of seconds, holding out a plate of home-baked chocolate chip cookies to Dante. He grabbed not one, but four.

"I'll get you a paper towel," Mom said.

I sat on the edge of the couch on the end closest to our good looking guest. "So you're my mentor."

Dante stuffed down half a cookie and talked with his mouth full. "*Mentor* is one of Melcher's terms. I prefer to think of us as a team."

"Have you always lived in Alaska?" Mom asked, handing Dante a napkin.

"Thanks, Mrs. Sky. These cookies are fantastic. I grew up in Fairbanks. Now I'm working on my degree at the University of Alaska Anchorage."

"How do you like UAA?" Mom asked.

"Small classes, top of the line professors, and in-state tuition—paid for courtesy of the government. You can't beat that."

Mom smiled.

Dante had the build of a jock and face of a Hollywood heartthrob. I couldn't imagine him in one of Melcher's messy white rooms.

"So, how did you die?" I asked.

Mom clicked her tongue. "Aurora…"

Dante sat up and grinned. "No really, that's my favorite question. It happened last winter. Maybe you heard about it on the news. Some friends and I were flown to the top of the Chugach Mountains to snowboard. Man, the powder rocked that day. So I got on my board and headed down—not my first time up there, mind you. I'm boarding, surfing the white wave," Dante said, swishing side to side in the armchair. "Then I go over a small cliff, like I've

done a hundred times before, and land not on my board, but my shoulder. Next thing I know I'm somersaulting down the mountain, crashing through brush and trees, gathering speed like a human avalanche. There's cloud coverage everywhere. I'm tumbling and I can't tell the snow from the sky. Then I'm tossed over the next cliff side and land a hundred feet down into a pile of fucking rocks. Excuse my language, Mrs. Sky."

Mom was too busy holding a hand to her heart.

I grinned. "And next thing you know you wake up in a white room?"

"Good as new," Dante said and winked.

"I'm sure you haven't gotten on a snowboard since," Mom said.

Dante leaned back. "*Au contraire*. The moment I was patched up I ran straight up to Alyeska and did a double-black diamond. Well, I shouldn't say right after—there was that little sabbatical I took first."

My face hurt from smiling. I liked this guy in a big brother kind of way. Melcher had finally done something useful.

"Can you stay for dinner?" Mom asked.

"I'd love to."

Mom radiated with pleasure every time Dante helped himself to more chicken tenderloins and mashed potatoes. Dante hummed with pleasure at each bite.

"Do you know how long it's been since I've had a home-cooked meal?" he asked.

"You should come over for dinner again soon," Mom said.

"I won't turn down an invitation."

While Dante scooped another heap of potatoes onto his plate, Mom shot me another one of the 'he's a keeper' looks.

I returned it with a narrow eyed 'leave me alone.'

I cleared my throat. "Would you like something besides water to drink? Soda or juice?"

"Water's good, thanks." Dante chewed heavily and looked up suddenly. "Sky, how can you not eat with all this delicious food in front of you?"

Oh, he was winning points with Mom, all right. I glared at him.

If he noticed, he ignored me and continued. "You should eat up. We have a long drive ahead of us."

I gaped at Dante. I must have heard wrong because I swear he just said *'drive.'*

"Training," Dante said between mouthfuls. "Got a mission planned in Fairbanks."

"Fairbanks!" I don't know which had me more flabbergasted.

"Sorry to spring this on you, Mrs. Sky—agents' orders."

Mom shifted in her seat. "Did Agent Melcher not tell you that Aurora was in a car accident?"

Dante stopped chewing. “I know it’s difficult, but Aurora has to get over her phobia if she’s going to get the job done. Unless, Aurora doesn’t feel up to the task.” Dante squinted at me. “Well, Sky, are you game?”

Oh, he was good, goading me like that. The last time I did something for the agents I ended up with a bloody neck. At least Dante wanted to take me out on field work. I could do without the locked rooms.

I grumbled under my breath. “And you want to leave *now*?”

“No time like the present.” Dante leaned back and smiled. “We’ll be back by bedtime tomorrow night. Promise.”

I hesitated.

“I’m sure you have a lot of questions, and we’ll have a long drive on which to answer them.”

I scooted back and stood. “Fine. I’ll go pack a few things.”

Dante grinned. “That a girl.”

“You will take your cell phone with you?” my mom called after me.

“Yeah, Mom.”

I ran up to my bedroom and threw an extra pair of pants and a heavy sweatshirt inside a backpack. Who knew if this thing would be as messy as my orientation?

I ducked into the hallway and trotted back down the stairs. “Ready.”

As I came into the kitchen, Dante stood and nodded to Mom. “Mrs. Sky, sorry to eat and split. This was fabulous. Don’t worry. I’ll see to it your daughter stays safe and sound.”

My mom nodded slowly. “Please do, Dante.”

I gave my mom a quick peck on the cheek and headed outside with Dante. A white Jeep Rubicon was parked in the drive. I stopped in front of it. “Let me guess. Government issued?”

“Even better, government paid. I’ll even let you drive her.” Dante tossed me the keys. I caught them instinctively and stared into my palm. “Come on, Sky, it’s all about getting back in the saddle.”

I threw the keys back. “I can’t.”

“Then buckle up, baby, ’cause I’m driving.”

I glanced over my shoulder, knowing full well I’d look like a sissy if I ran back inside my house. Training couldn’t be any worse than orientation. Nothing could.

A golden retriever stared at me from the backseat when I climbed inside the Jeep. My anxiety dissipated at once.

“Who’s this?”

“Sky, meet my best bud, Tommy. I named him after Tommy Moe.”

I raised a brow.

“Olympic Gold medalist in men’s alpine skiing,” Dante said as though I was daft. “Ninety-four, first American male skier to win two medals in a single Winter Olympics, and he was an Alaskan resident at the time.”

I resisted the impulse to say something snarky and reached back to pet

the silken fur on top of the retriever's head instead. Tommy slapped a very large tongue over my fingers. I pulled my hand away.

"Watch out for that dog—he's a lover."

I settled back into the passenger's seat and buckled in. A long ride up north sounded relaxing…until Dante started driving.

He ripped into Jewel Lake Road and floored it onto Minnesota Avenue. I reached for the roll bar overhead.

"What the hell are you doing?" I yelled.

Dante rammed the clutch into fourth gear. "I'm going to drive the terror out of you, Sky. By the time we get back, you'll be spinning wheelies in parking lots."

"I've never liked wheelies."

"You will soon."

"You're a real jackass, you know?"

"And you're a backseat driver."

"Backseat driver? I'm not a backseat driver! Have I told you to slow the hell down or watch out for cars changing lanes?"

Dante chuckled. "Relax, Sky. We're superhuman, remember? Danger is what we do best."

I folded my arms over my chest. "Whatever."

I glanced back. Tommy must have been used to Dante's driving because the dog moved with the car.

Dante spared me from yelling at him again by slowing down.

"So what do you want to know about our fanged foes and how we've been recruited to rid this world of evil? Fire away."

"All right, are there really vampires?"

"I was told you were initiated."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"It should. The beast bit you, didn't it?"

"Yeah, but any crazy person can bite someone."

A smile worked its way up Dante's cheeks. "Did this one drink blood straight from your vein?"

"Yeah…"

"Welcome to the world of the demonic, Sky."

I stared out the window at the shadowed storefronts as we passed through downtown. There was a certain thrill to leaving town even if we were headed deeper into the darkness.

I shifted in my seat. "Did *you* believe the agents when they told you there were vampires?"

Dante shrugged. "I don't know. I mean, anything's possible. What I didn't believe is that they'd doped me up on some kind of noxious blood that'd knock a creature out."

"And then they initiated you."

Dante was quiet a moment then laughed. "Oh, yeah. Who forgets their

first bite? It's more memorable than the first time you have sex."

"That's gross."

"You'll understand once you have a chance to compare."

Well, I could compare. Not that it was any of Dante's business. Sex and bloodsucking were seriously overrated in my opinion.

I cleared my throat. "I believe we were talking about vampires. Was yours rabid?"

"He was a mess."

"How did you finish him?"

"Shotgun."

"And then you entered a transition period or whatever, met with your mentor, and got to work?"

"Then I skipped town; left the country."

I leaned forward, mouth hanging open. "What? Where'd you go?"

"Netherlands."

I choked out a laugh of disbelief. "What? And then the agents found you?"

"Yep. Caught up with me in Amsterdam where I was smoking more weed than a hippie at Woodstock."

I stared at Dante. I stared until he glanced over, and we both burst into laughter.

"What did the agents do to you?" I asked.

"I'll tell you what they wanted to do—ship me off to some underground facility in Siberia."

"How'd you get out of that one?"

"I said, 'Hey, I was just taking a little holiday before I reported to duty. Give me a chance to prove myself. You got to have some kind of assignment you can give me. See how I do. Trust me, guys, you want this assassin on active duty, not wasting away in some ice cave.' So they gave me a shot."

"And you've been slaying vampires ever since."

"Roger that, Sky."

I glanced out the window. We were no longer in town, but on the highway headed north. Mountains turned to shadows, surrounding us from every angle. The snow along the highway was a glimmer in the headlights.

"Why run in the first place?" I asked. "I mean, don't we turn into vampires if we don't take Melcher's special antidote?"

Dante shrugged. "At the time I didn't care if I turned into a vampire. Who wouldn't want to live forever? Then Melcher explained there was no way of knowing what kind of vampire I'd turn into. They've infected us with everything: rabies, porphyria, typhus, cholera. If it's fatal, it's in us."

Dante tapped his fingers over the steering wheel. "If the rabies turned me, I'd be Schizo. Crazy. Worse than dead."

"At least you got in one last hurrah," I said. "Do we ever get out-of-state assignments?"

"I wish, but we've got our hands full in the Great North. The vamps are moving in on us. Cold. Dark. It's like Florida for seniors."

"So they can't go out in the daylight?"

"Oh, they're free to roam at any time. They just don't like to—light sensitivity and all."

"Any other repellents I should be aware of? Crosses? Holy water? Garlic?"

"No, no, and yes. Rabies vampires can't stand garlic."

"Why?"

"It's their disease. They're supersensitive to any olfactory stimulation, which includes garlic. Then you've got your porphyria vampires, whose skin is hypersensitive to sunlight. The real irony about a vampire is that their disease is keeping them alive. In most cases, their families or entire villages were wiped out, but some kind of freaky chemical reaction with their blood both killed and preserved them in a state of reanimation."

"Their AB negative blood."

"Yep. And now, thanks to the green revolution, scientists have discovered a way to trigger the dormant deadly virus inside vampires using modified organisms. They just needed a way to get it inside the creatures' system. That's where we come in."

"I still don't get why these organisms are toxic to them, but not to us. Don't we share the same blood type?"

"Affirmative."

"Then why isn't it toxic to us?"

"The antidote." Dante looked over and winked. "It counteracts the toxin running through our veins."

"What happens if they run out of the antidote?"

How could Dante act so calm? A shot of liquid was the only thing preventing us from becoming one of those creatures.

"Don't worry, Sky. If you turned Melcher would send in an assassin to put you out of your misery. Maybe me."

I grumbled. "Comforting."

Dante laughed. "Next question."

"Have you ever experienced any side effects?"

Dante smacked his lips together. "Nope. Besides feeling awesome. Have you noticed anything funny?"

"For a while I had trouble looking at myself in a mirror."

"Ah," Dante said with a smile.

"Ah, what?"

"That would be the pellagra. Victims of the disease become perturbed when faced with their reflection for some reason. They're also sensitive to sunlight."

Just another perk of being a vampire hunter." I grumbled under my breath. "How many of us are there?"

"Don't know."

"How long have vampire hunters been around?"

"Probably as long as there've been vampires. We genetically altered AB negative lab rats are the latest and greatest in the history of vampire hunters. Our kind has been around twenty years, tops."

"Do vampires know about us?"

"They're learning quickly and spreading the word. Not that many have an opportunity to talk. You never want to leave behind any witnesses."

"What about human witnesses?"

"Don't take out a vamp in front of a human."

"What if one bites you in front of people?"

"Don't let it."

"What, it's that easy?"

"Here's a little secret, Sky. You're not going to run into many rabid vampires. The agents round those ones up, contain them, and sic 'em on new recruits. The kind of creatures we're after are cagey. They know how to blend in, and they're certainly not going to tear into your flesh the first chance they get. They feed on the feeble-minded."

I pictured my Mousketeers: Noel, Whitney, and Hope.

Dante continued. "And then they feed on them again and again. There are the hunters, of course, who enjoy the kill, but the crafty ones find willing sources to supply them."

"Why would anyone willingly let a vampire bite them?"

"Like I said, Sky, better than sex."

"And again, ew."

"Makes people feel alive."

"What about you? I don't see any bite marks on your neck."

Dante chuckled. "That's vanity for you. I don't let them bite my neck."

I faced forward and rolled my eyes upward. "I don't even want to know."

"Sure you do. Chest and biceps work equally well; occasionally I'll throw in a wrist if I have to."

"So if they started out with human teeth, how do they pierce the skin to get to the vein?"

"Most of them sharpen a couple back molars. It's rather thoughtful of them, actually, more like a sharpened needle piercing the skin above the vein than a rusty nail."

"Can't we take them out before they bite us?"

"What's the fun in that?"

"I don't think any of it sounds fun, but I'll avoid getting bitten if I can."

"Believe me, Sky, you're going to have a lot easier time taking these things out when they're twitching on the floor. Are you really up for hand-to-hand combat?"

I shrugged and stared out the window as we passed through Wasilla. The city was like one long strip mall paved with parking lots leading to

supermarkets, sporting good warehouses, restaurants, liquor stores, gas stations, and gun shops.

"This is one ugly ass town," I said.

"This isn't the real Wasilla," Dante said. "It's just a front. Think of all the beautiful lakes and mountains in the area."

Great, more mountains. I found them repressive.

I didn't want to know how fast Dante was driving for us to have reached Wasilla already. There were still around six hours left to go—well, that would be the case if he'd obeyed the speed limit.

Once we passed the small town of Willow, there was a whole lot of nothing. Only, it was pitch-black out, so I couldn't see the nothing. But I could feel it out there—great empty expanses of wilderness. It was the middle of the night, and we were the only vehicle on the road.

Dante pulled off the Parks Highway into an empty parking lot at mile 135.2 to let Tommy take a pee. The retriever leapt from the Jeep as soon as Dante opened the back door. He sniffed the snow and began marking. I stepped out to stretch my legs and get some fresh air. Maybe not the best idea. The air was the kind of cold that hurt to breathe. I hugged myself in my arms and danced in place.

Dante walked to the end of the lot and stared in the distance. I joined his side.

"I always pull off here," Dante said. "It's one of the best views of Mount McKinley…when you can see her."

He seemed like he was trying awfully hard to see through the dark. I knew why he did it, because I could feel it out there, too—a majestic presence.

I turned and headed back to the Jeep.

"Tommy," Dante called. "Let's go."

Tommy ran back as soon as Dante opened the back door. The blast of the heat felt good on my legs.

Dante had the Jeep in fifth flying back down the highway in no time.

"So what's the assignment?" I asked.

"Got a target that needs taking out. Calls himself Ivo. He's been snacking on college freshmen. Last month he strangled a girl and sucked her dry."

I flinched. "She's dead?"

"Yep. Ivo hangs with another vampire named Patrick. Patrick's not violent, but he's a feeder nonetheless. I figure two of them…two of us…"

"And you want me to take Patrick?"

Dante grinned. "No, I want you to take Ivo."

I crossed my arms. "Of course you do."

"First conquer the mountain."

"What are you? A psych major?"

"Nope. Environmental studies."

"Of course."

“What about you, Sky? Got a major in mind after high school?”

“I like to read and write.”

“I imagine you’ll find yourself with plenty of material. It could be worse. We could be dead.”

“…or in Fairbanks.” I leaned forward in my seat. Were we there already? The time on the dashboard clock read two twenty-five.

The roads were deserted. The temperature on a bank display board said negative fifty-three degrees. Seriously, how did anyone other than vampires live here?

“Got to make a quick pit stop to pick up my informant.”

“You have your own informant?”

“Not exactly. Melcher prefers we don’t meet them at all. He likes informants to report to him and then he passes the intel onto us. But sometimes we work together.”

“How do informants get chosen?”

“Like us. They die, the agents and their surgeons step in, but the transfusion doesn’t take. The procedure costs a fortune. Might as well make some use out of them.”

“So I guess we’re lucky.”

“Ain’t that the truth. Informants have to pose as vampire junkies, getting the juice sucked out of them time and again while we swoop in and save the day. We’ve got it made, Sky.”

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15
Drink Of Death

Dante turned onto a secluded road leading into dense woods. He followed a set of tire tracks through the snow. They led to a small cabin with smoke drifting from its chimney. The windows were dark.

"Brrr!" I cried when I got out of the Jeep. "If this Ivo doesn't kill me, the cold certainly will."

Dante grinned. "The great thing about Fairbanks is it doesn't matter whether it's twenty below or minus seventy. It all feels the same: damn cold." Dante tapped out a rhythm once he reached the cabin door.

A bolt slid back. A young woman with heavy eyeliner opened the door. She nodded for us to come in. Dante slipped in with Tommy, and I followed close behind. The woman shut the door as soon as I was through.

"Took you long enough," she said. "Hopefully there's still a party to go to."

Dante raised a brow. "It's two thirty—Ivo's just getting started."

"Hi, Tommy." The women's voice softened when she talked to the retriever. She scratched him behind the ears.

"Aurora Sky, meet Janine."

"Latest recruit?" Janine asked Dante.

"Roger that."

"Is this her first time in the field?"

"She'll do great," he said.

Janine walked over to a small square table. Dante tossed a duffel bag on top. As Janine turned up the flame on the gas lamp, shadows stretched and leapt across the sparse room to the wood beams overhead.

I hovered by the doorway a moment before walking over to the wood stove. Tommy followed me and curled into a ball on the ground beside the hearth. The backs of my legs started to prickle as I watched Dante pull knives out of his bag and set them on the tabletop. I turned myself slowly, evenly, like a piece of corn on the cob rotating over the flames.

The cabin was one open room with a small kitchen. There was a twin bed against the wall near the fire covered in a patchwork quilt.

"I thought you were going to wait until Renard was back in town and do one clean sweep," Janine said.

"Nah, we'll catch up to him next time."

"Who's Renard?" I asked.

"A real nasty," Janine said.

"As bad as this Ivo character?"

"Worse."

"Worse than Ivo?" Dante asked in disbelief.

"Even the junkies avoid him."

I was definitely not getting the romanticized version of vampires here. Surely they weren't all rabid nut jobs and psycho killers? The Mouseketeers didn't seem to think so.

"Sky, let's get you a weapon."

"Dagger," Janine suggested.

"Perfect."

"Lift up your pant leg," Janine ordered.

I pulled up the right leg of my jeans. Janine wrapped a leg holster around my calf and stuck a dagger into the sheath. I wrapped my fingers around the hilt and took it back out. My stomach tied into knots when I held it in front of my face.

"You'll be fine," Dante said, slapping me on the back. "Let's go party. Tommy, stay."

I returned the knife back to its holster, covering it with my pant leg.

Janine sat in the front seat of the Jeep and navigated Dante to a house party on the edge of town. The windows on the house were all boarded up. Only four cars lined the curb.

Janine sounded uneasy when she spoke. "I thought there'd be more people here tonight."

"Aurora, what's your cell number?" Dante asked.

I recited my number and Dante dialed it into his own phone. My phone began to ring seconds later.

Dante hung up. "There, now you have mine. Okay. Let's go over this real quick. Janine and I are going to make an appearance, but head out before the rest of Ivo's guests leave. For Janine's safety, we don't want any witnesses placing her as one of the last people at the party. Sky, you'll stay, pretend to get wasted, and take out Ivo. Get him to take you somewhere secluded—shouldn't be too difficult. If you can take out Patrick, too, even better. If not, have him bite you, and I'll finish the job. Call my cell when the junkies have cleared out."

Janine's safety? He was worried about *Janine's* safety?

I leaned forward. "So basically you're going to abandon me here?"

Dante looked over his seat. "It's the best play, Sky. No more white rooms. You know what to do. Now lose the scarf unless you want to use it to mop up blood."

I unwrapped the scarf slowly and set it on the empty seat beside me. A chill slid down my spine. I shuddered involuntarily.

"Remember," Dante said. "I'm Peter and you're Wendy. It's safer if they don't know our real names."

Peter, as in Peter Pan. Pretty fitting, really. Dante was like a boy who never grew up. At least he wasn't calling himself Van Helsing and me Buffy. Might not go over too well with the undead crowd.

I slipped out of the car as Dante grabbed a case of bottled beer out of the

trunk and slung it under an arm. He put his other arm around Janine. She held a second case of beer in her free hand. We walked to the front porch, and Dante pounded on the door.

"Get the door!" someone yelled from inside.

The door opened a crack, and a scrawny young man with a pierced nose, brow, and ears peered out. His face muscles relaxed when he saw Janine. "Oh, hey, Janine, come in."

"Hey, Thomas."

As Thomas held the door open for us I noticed raw bite marks on his wrist. A wave of nausea rolled over me. I tensed my jaw to quell it.

The front door led into the living room. A pale young man sat on a torn-up couch. He looked like skin and bone beneath his ratty T-shirt. He was leaning against a slightly older man in slacks. The groomed man didn't pay attention to us as he licked a drop of blood from the corner of his lip.

"Janine," Dante chided in a booming voice. "I thought you said this thing was going to be classy."

Nice way to call attention to us, Dante.

The man narrowed his eyes. "Who's this?"

Janine sauntered in and plopped down on the other side of the couch. "Patrick, Peter. Peter, Patrick. Peter's visiting from Anchorage. He's a smart ass. I mentioned him, remember?"

"And who is this fresh peach?"

I couldn't locate the owner of the voice at first. It was deep and far away, as though coming from an overhead speaker.

"His friend's ex. She just got dumped and wanted to get out of town." Janine batted her lashes. "Stay away from her, Ivo. She's new to all this."

"Fresh blood." Ivo laughed.

I located him in a corner in a midnight-blue button-down shirt. A silver pendant with a Celtic symbol drew the eye to the dark wiry hair below his throat. Stubble covered his chin and cheeks. It was odd to assign an age to a vampire, but if Ivo were mortal, I'd place him around thirty. He was seated on a large armchair with worn upholstery. A girl with black cropped hair sat in his lap like a limp doll.

My skin crawled.

"Did we arrive late?" Dante asked, looking around. "Jeanie told me this place was going to be buzzing."

Ivo shrugged lazily and looked me over. "Some folks thought it was too cold. Only the brave came out."

Dante pulled a cap off a beer bottle with his bare hand. "Well, we didn't drive all this way for nothing. Beer anyone?"

The girl on Ivo's lap stood. "I'll have one. Thanks."

Dante handed her the beer and began opening another. "Wendy?"

I knew I was supposed to pretend to get drunk, but I wasn't much of a beer drinker. Heck, I wasn't much of a drinker at all excluding my solo New

Year's Eve celebration and pre-sex binge. God, did I know how to have a good time or what?

"I bet Wendy wants something stronger," Ivo said.

I forced a smile. "Yes, you read my mind."

He seemed to like that I said this.

"Why don't you come back with me to the kitchen?"

"Lead the way."

The kitchen was as grimy as the living room. The linoleum was discolored and a section was missing in front of the fridge.

"Wendy, Wendy, Wendy," Ivo said as he looked through a cabinet. "What would my Wendy want? Ah." A bottle slid across the shelf like a claw over plywood. Ivo pulled out a bottle of tequila and handed it to me.

I unscrewed the cap and took a swig from the bottle. I welcomed the burn down my throat. I took a second swig then held the bottle out to Ivo. "You want a sip?"

His eyes glittered. "Not yet."

I felt that odd pull of revulsion when he looked at me.

Ivo leaned against the counter. "Poor little Wendy, lost her boyfriend."

Laughter trickled from my lips. I quickly covered it with another swig of tequila. Quite the opposite, Ivo. I had a boyfriend who was really into me.

Ivo's earlier playmate walked in with a half-empty beer bottle. I couldn't read her expression. She was most likely too out of it to form a thought, let alone expression. "Ivo, are you coming back out soon?"

Ivo grimaced.

"Why don't you go home, Casey? I've had enough of you."

Ivo might have been able to walk and talk, but he was no less despicable than the rabies vampire I'd killed during orientation.

Casey blinked at him a couple times, turned and left the kitchen.

I set the bottle of tequila down on the counter. "I should check on my friends."

Ivo followed me to the living room. Dante was sitting on the arm of the armchair, bottle of beer in hand, smirking at Patrick as the latter glowered at him.

"So Peter, you want your blood sucked out?" Patrick said.

"Truth be told, I'd like to suck a little blood myself, but I can't—human and all. No, I like to *watch*."

My lips curled. Sure, Dante was a great actor, but I could swear he was enjoying himself.

"Or do you not suck women's blood?" Dante taunted.

Patrick's fists tightened. I willed him to get up and sock Dante in the jaw so we could get this damn assignment over with together. But just as quickly his shoulders relaxed, and he called Janine over.

Janine approached the couch and stood in front of Patrick. I couldn't see her expression with her back to me.

"Very well, you want to watch me suck your girlfriend's blood?" Patrick sneered. "Is that what turns you on?"

He grasped Janine by the wrist and twisted her arm as he pulled her closer.

I forgot to breathe.

Dante sounded as cool as glacial ice. "On the neck."

Patrick released Janine's wrist and guided her to his lap. The human boys watched without expression. Patrick's mouth widened as he closed in on Janine's neck. Dante leaned forward. I turned and hurried back into the kitchen.

Ivo followed behind me. I guzzled down the tequila. Sure, brilliant way to cure the sick pit inside my stomach—dose it with esophagus-burning alcohol. I coughed.

Pretend to get drunk, Aurora. Don't get drunk!

The vampire chuckled. "You're such a pretty young thing, Wendy. Not like the trash Patrick drags in from the gutters."

I wiped my mouth on the back of my hand. The floor went out of focus.

When Ivo's lips opened over his teeth in a grotesque smile, I noticed that each tooth had been sharpened to a point. I almost retched.

"Do you think they're done?" I asked abruptly.

Ivo didn't answer. When I returned to the living room, Dante and Janine were gone. The two boys were smoking in a corner. Patrick sat in the same spot on the couch drinking a beer.

My jaw dropped. "Where did Janine and Peter go?"

Patrick looked over my shoulder at Ivo and smiled slowly. "They wanted some time alone."

"They left?" I knew this was part of the plan, but they didn't even say goodbye.

"The night's still young," Ivo said behind my back. "Matter of fact, it's always night in Fairbanks this time of the year." He laughed softly. "I'll take you wherever you need to go, but you don't want to go just yet, do you?"

"I guess not."

Ivo stepped closer. "You came for something, didn't you, Wendy?"

"Yes," I said in a voice so soft it was barely audible.

He inhaled my neck. Cold fingers ran through my hair. His arm snaked around my waist as he leaned in.

I pulled away. "Not here. I…don't want an audience."

Ivo looked me over and chuckled. "Follow me."

He led me down the dark hall to a bedroom in back.

There was a barricade of splintered wood against the outside of his windowpane. The floorboards were scuffed and creaky. A mattress sat in the middle of the room without a frame or blankets.

Homey.

Ivo closed the door behind him and circled me. "So Wendy's wandered

into Never Never Land seeking answers…or something else?"

So the Pan reference wasn't lost on him.

"Has Wendy been bitten before?" he prodded.

"Once."

"Such a lovely thing, our Wendy. I bet your blood is sweet." Ivo swooped up to me. "I want to drink. Every. Last. Drop."

He opened his mouth so wide, I feared he'd snap off my neck. I recoiled. When he tried again, I pulled my arm back and rammed my fist in his face. Pain splintered across my knuckles. I twisted my hips to add torque to the blow. Ivo grunted in surprise. He put a hand to his face, but when he looked up, he smiled.

"Well, well. Wendy's a feisty thing. I don't get many live ones these days. Youth today is so dark and disturbed. They've given up. Takes the fun out of it. Come on, Wendy, let's teach you to fly."

Ivo grabbed my shoulders and tossed me across the room. I hit a set of drawers and landed on the floorboards. Ivo hauled me up by the neck and threw me so hard over his bed that I flipped and fell over the other side with a tremendous *whack*.

I tried to stand. My arms shook underneath me. Warm blood tickled from my lip, and I noticed Ivo's eyes shine. He dropped to his knees and loomed over me.

"Where are your friends now, Wendy? They've abandoned you. Soon they'll go out into the world and live out their useless little lives. They'll grow up, age. But you, Wendy, you'll never grow old."

Ivo's razor teeth pierced through my skin. He dug in deep and shook his mouth like a bloodthirsty wolf. My skin tore. Blood spilled down my neck. My heart pumped blood up my throat. Ivo drank greedily.

One,two,three,four,five...six. I counted in my head.

Suddenly his jaw slackened. His grip weakened. He fell on top of me, convulsing. I shoved him off.

While he twitched, I pulled up my pant leg and took out the dagger. His eyes bulged.

"Hun…Hun…" He tried to speak.

"Vampire hunter," I said for him. "Not so sweet anymore, am I?"

I lifted the dagger with both hands and brought it down through his heart. I tore through his skin the way he'd torn through mine.

The twitching stopped. Ivo's eyes gaped at me. I pulled out my dagger and wiped the blood off on his shirt.

I still needed to kill Patrick. I unlaced my boots and left them in Ivo's bedroom before walking down the edge of the hall. The floorboards bent under me, but didn't creak. The entry to the living room loomed closer, and I crouched by the doorframe. For a long time, no one spoke inside. Finally, one of the boys said he was tired.

"You know the rules," Patrick said. "You can party here, but you can't

crash."

Their footsteps creaked on the floorboards, followed by the slam of the door. Outside an engine sputtered and chocked before rumbling to life.

I peeked inside the living room. Patrick sat alone on the couch, sipping a beer, probably washing down the blood. I doubled back, put on my boots, and walked into the living room. I stumbled into the room, leaning against the doorframe.

Patrick looked me up and down, a smirk on his lips.

Blood trickled from my lip and neck. My head throbbed from the whack I'd taken on the floor.

I forced a sloppy grin to make Patrick think I was drunk. "He's a bit rough."

I staggered over to the couch and "passed out" with my head in Patrick's lap. His legs tensed under me, and he started pushing me aside.

Come on, Patrick, easy offering—drink!

The push against my shoulder eased up. Patrick's breath blew over my skin when he inhaled the bite on my neck. I waited for his teeth to break through. He ran his tongue over the open wound.

I had to force myself to stay still. The licking wasn't causing him to convulse the way the biting did.

Patrick swallowed and I had to suppress a shudder as he licked me again.

Maybe Ivo had sucked out the good stuff and left behind diluted blood.

Patrick licked and swallowed again. Then he became very still right before he began to convulse.

I rose off his lap, pulled out the knife, and stuck it in his heart.

I took my time walking to the bathroom. The warm water didn't seem to be working so I ran a hand towel under cold. When I glanced in the mirror I saw myself clearly. A cut bled over my forehead. I dabbed at it with the wet cloth then went to work on my neck. I dabbed and rinsed until the water ran clear.

I pulled out my phone after I finished.

Fane answered immediately. "Aurora."

He felt so far away. Hundreds of miles and a dark void in between separated us.

"I miss you," I whispered. Tears gathered in my eyes.

"Aurora, where are you?"

"Never land."

"Aurora?"

I flipped my phone shut, reopened it, and dialed Dante. I spoke before he could say hello.

"It's done."

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16
Battle Wounds

I waited in the back of the Jeep while Dante and Janine dosed the place in gasoline. I had my scarf back on. If my neck bled anymore at least it would blend in.

I didn't see Dante and Janine return to the Jeep so much as hear the doors open and slam shut.

Janine's expression softened when she turned to look at me. "Good work, Aurora."

"Did I tell you she was ready or what?" Dante spread a hand over his chest. "My raven-haired prodigy. I'm so proud."

"Let's get out of here," Janine said.

Dante held up a hand. "Wait. I want to make sure the fire catches."

I turned to my window and stared at the boarded house.

When black smoke began to leak from the cracks of the house, Dante shifted into drive and took off down the road.

I stared out my window at the deserted streets. It looked like a ghost town at night.

Dante ran a red light. It didn't matter. We were the only moving vehicle on the road.

Tommy wagged his tail when we returned to the cabin.

I sat with a *thud* on one of the wood chairs.

Janine grabbed a plastic gallon of water and poured it into a kettle by the cook stove.

"Coffee before the drive home?"

"Me, me," Dante said.

"Aurora?"

"Yeah, coffee's fine." Anything warm would do.

Janine lit the flame on the stove then took a seat across from me. I reached under my pant leg to remove the dagger. It scraped the table as I pushed it toward Janine.

"Keep it," she said.

I nodded and returned the dagger to its holster.

Janine was back on her feet the moment the kettle hissed steam.

My eyes wandered to the corner of the cabin. The quilt from the twin bed now lay on the floor in front of the fireplace. The sheets were in a wad at the foot of the bed, along with the pillows.

Tell me they didn't. Not while I was off getting pummeled, bitten, and left to stab two vampires in the heart.

"Smooth moves, Sky," Dante said, interrupting my train of thought. "I wish I'd been there to see them. We found Patrick in the same place on the

couch as though he never saw it coming. Ivo was on his back on the floor."

Janine set an enamel mug in front of me. The steam rose below my chin.

"We found Ivo in his bedroom," Janine said carefully. "Did everything go okay? I noticed you have bruises."

"Those aren't bruises!" Dante said. "They're battle wounds. You fought the good fight, Sky." He drank from the mug Janine handed him and winced after swallowing the scalding liquid. "Next time we'll do it together."

In your dreams.

I'm sure Dante didn't mean it in a sexual way, but I couldn't help feeling annoyed. I wasn't angry at Janine. She looked genuinely concerned, and I'm sure a quick rough and tumble while I battled for my life wasn't her idea.

"I can't wait until Renard and his cohorts get back to town. We're going to buzz right back up here and paint this town red."

"Dante?" I said.

"Yeah?"

"Shut up."

Janine smirked.

Even Dante smiled.

"Come on, Sky, *lighten up*. We've got another long drive ahead of us."

There were no traces of light when we stepped outside. It was hard to tell night from day in this arctic wasteland.

Janine walked us to the Jeep. She shook my hand.

"Welcome to the team, Aurora. You really impressed me back there. I look forward to working with you again."

"Thanks for the dagger."

"My pleasure."

Dante gave Janine a big bear hug, lifting her off her feet in the process. She laughed and swatted Dante playfully on the back.

"Until the next time duty calls…" she said, laughing again.

Dante broke out into a lopsided grin. "See you soon. Let's roll, Sky."

The only thing rolling were my eyes. We jumped into the Jeep and slammed our doors shut at the same time. I gave a quick wave to Janine before she disappeared inside the cabin.

Dante blasted through the secluded road to the paved streets.

"Mind if I speed?" he asked.

I had stabbed two more vampires in the heart. Dante could gun it for all I cared.

"Just get me the hell out of here."

"That's the spirit, Sky."

Dante floored the gas pedal at the first big intersection. As we approached the center, he cranked the steering wheel. The Jeep slid at a

sideways angle.

I grasped the nearest handlebar.

Dante straightened out the wheel and we were once more moving head first.

When I'd regained my breath, I screamed, "In one piece, Dante!"

He chuckled. "Sorry, it's just so much fun driving these streets when no one's on them."

I pulled out my cell phone and dialed into voicemail.

"Who are you calling?" Dante asked.

"Shh!"

Fane's voice spoke urgently inside my ear. *"Hey, I've been trying to reach you. Are you okay? Give me a call."*

Dante whistled a tune as I tried to listen.

When we entered Nenana, Dante said, "Gotta gas up," before pulling into a Chevron.

He hopped out of the Jeep singing "Young Forever" by Jay-Z. I could hear him through the glass. "Forever young, I wanna be forever young…"

Tommy lifted his head at the sound then settled it back over his paws and sighed.

I called Fane while Dante refilled.

He answered immediately. "Aurora, I've been worried."

"I'm fine. Sorry about cutting you off earlier."

"What's going on?"

"I got kidnapped…by choice anyway. Sort of. I just left Fairbanks."

"Are you kidding?"

"Wish I was."

"How'd you get there?"

"A friend convinced me to skip the whole car rehabilitation thing and dive in head first…or in this case, *drive* in head first."

"A friend," Fane repeated. The words dropped like a frown. "Who's this friend?"

"Why? So you can get jealous?"

"It's a guy then."

I glanced out the window. Dante belted out, "Forever, forever," into the pre-dawn darkness.

"More of an annoying big brother."

"When will you be back?"

"I don't know. Noon maybe? I'll call you when I'm in town. Could we meet at the video store?"

"Yeah, I'll be there."

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17
Some Like It Red

While the streets of Fairbanks had been dead, Anchorage was choked with traffic when we returned late morning.

I stifled a yawn.

Dante hadn't shut up since we left Fairbanks —like he was on some kind of adrenaline rush. He'd wanted a detailed play by play of what went down at Ivo's. Finally, I'd relented. It was either that or listen to him sing.

Dante said I did good. I had to admit it went a lot smoother when I only had to stab my target once.

"Do you mind dropping me off in front of Video City?" I asked as we neared home.

Dante raised a brow.

"I want to spend a quiet night watching movies."

Dante broke out into his trademark grin. "Good idea. Rent some chick flicks, kick back, and relax. You earned it, Sky."

I began tapping my fingers over my thigh as we approached the video store.

I unclicked my seatbelt when Dante parked.

"Thanks for dropping me off. See you around?"

"No, it's cool," he replied. "I'll wait while you pick out some DVDs, then drive you home. I can help make suggestions if you like. I have excellent taste in movies."

I looked at the dashboard. "I'm kind of meeting someone here."

Dante clucked his tongue. "Is this someone a boy?"

"None of your business."

"We're partners, Sky. You don't ever have to lie to me. Just say the word. I'm cool with it."

I relaxed in my seat. "Yeah, I know. Thanks."

"No problemo."

I reached back and scratched Tommy's head. "Bye for now, Tommy. Keep Dante out of trouble."

Dante chuckled. "Stay out of trouble yourself, Sky. Sure I shouldn't stick around and meet this boy, make sure he's up to snuff?"

"I never said it was a boy."

Dante smiled way too much, but at least it wasn't creepy like Melcher. "Of course it's a boy."

"Whatever," I said. "You're such a man child."

Dante reached behind my seat for my backpack, laughing as he did.

"Forever young," he said with a wink, handing over my pack.

Once on solid ground, I said my last goodbye to Dante.

"Be in touch again soon, Sky. Get your rest!"

The Rubicon sped away.

I opened my phone and called Fane to tell him I was at Video City. A minute later he pulled in. Either he drove at lightning speed or was nearby to begin with. I was thinking the latter given he was driving the tank.

The Catalina squealed as he pulled in front of Video City.

"I don't think she likes the cold," I said as he stepped out.

Not even a smile. Crescent shadows rimmed Fane's eyes. Maybe I shouldn't have called him in the middle of the night, hung up, and then ignored his calls for the next couple hours.

"So you took off for Fairbanks with some guy?" he asked.

Then there was that. "Brother-type guy."

"Right," Fane said, sarcastically. "Let's just get the facts straight. You left town with a guy who is *not* your brother and spent the entire night with him."

Tears swam over my vision—probably because I hadn't slept in twenty-seven hours and had rammed a dagger through two hearts earlier. Regardless of being killer vampires, a heart was a heart. I'd caused two to stop beating in the last twenty-four hours.

"Are you crying? Hey, come here."

I loved that Fane's voice could change in an instant. I loved his arms around me even more.

I burrowed against him, determined never to leave the comfort of his chest. The world could go on without me. Fane brushed my hair back tenderly. His fingers stilled over the bruise at the hairline of my forehead then touched it gently. He stroked the tender flesh as though he could rub the wound away. My scalp tingled.

"Want to tell me how you got this bruise?"

I looked up into his eyes. "I just want to be with you."

Fane frowned. "Why did you leave?"

"Friend emergency. I can't talk about it. I'm sorry."

"I don't care what it was. What kind of *friend* expects you to rush off to Fairbanks in the middle of the night by car? Seems like they're asking too much of you."

"Tell me about it."

My phone started ringing from inside my coat pocket. Fane raised a brow as I dug it out. It better not be Dante.

Nope, Mom.

I pressed the phone to my ear. "Hi, Mom. We made it to town. Be home shortly…I'm fine. Yep. No, he has to get going. Yes, I'm sure…Because I know. Fine." I held my phone down. "Dante, want to stay for lunch? Are you sure? Okay." I put the phone back to my ear. "He's busy, but says thanks. Right, so see you soon. Bye, Mom."

I closed my phone and rolled my eyes.

Fane stared at me. “What kind of name is Dante?”

“What kind of name is Fane?” I countered.

He chose not to answer, instead asking, “Doesn’t your mother want to have *me* over for lunch?”

“I don’t know.”

“Maybe I ought to meet your mom and assure her my intentions are honorable.”

“Oh, are they?” I teased.

Fane grinned. “Well, perhaps not all honorable, but for the most part.”

“What about dinner tonight? That’ll give me a chance to rest.” I was fading fast.

“Just tell me when. I already know where.” Fane grinned. “How about I walk you home for now?”

“That’s really nice, but I’ve gotten over my fear of cars.”

If I could survive fourteen hours in a moving vehicle with Dante, I could get inside a care with anyone.

“How about for old time’s sake?” Fane asked. He grinned. “And my own selfish motivation to keep you by my side a little longer.”

My smile reached my ears. “Okay then, for old time’s sake.”

Fane took my pack and put it over his shoulder.

The walk looked different without the snow shower coming down on us. I stole sideways glances at Fane. I saw him trying not to smile every time I stared at him. I slipped my hand inside his.

“You’re not smoking?” I asked.

“I quit.”

“Why?”

“I don’t want to expose you to secondhand smoke.”

“So you just quit like that? Cold turkey?”

“I haven’t smoked all weekend.”

“Aren’t you having cravings?”

“For nicotine?” Fane paused. “No.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

He stared into the distance before answering. “Some habits are easier to kick than others.”

I squeezed his hand. For all Fane’s tough talk about being immune, it wasn’t worth the risk. I didn’t want Fane to get cancer. I didn’t want anything bad to ever happen to him.

A chill ran down my spine.

“What is it?” Fane asked.

I don’t know how he felt it. My body didn’t visibly shudder. I pulled my hand out of his.

“What did you mean that day in gym when you said you’d seen that look on my face before?”

Fane gave me a blank stare. Then something seemed to register in his

eyes. He turned quickly away.

"It just reminded me of something. It's nothing."

It wasn't nothing, but I couldn't exactly demand an answer when he'd been so cool about the whole pulling an all nighter in Fairbanks Operation Fake Friend emergency.

As we topped the hill, I grabbed Fane's hand again.

"Thank you for walking me home."

Fane pulled me to a stop. There was a kindness inside his eyes that took me aback.

"Next time your friend has a crisis that can't wait call me," he said. "I'll drive you wherever you need to go."

"In the tank? We'd still be on the road."

Fane chuckled and kissed me on the head, managing to avoid the bruise.

Mom woke me gently at six thirty. I showered in under five minutes, combed my hair, blew it dry, and put on a fresh change of clothes. I waited to wrap the scarf around my neck until I'd finished getting ready. My neck ached where I'd been bitten.

I sat on top of the couch's back in the front parlor, just staring out the window until I saw two headlights beam into our driveway. I jumped to my feet and opened the door before Fane had a chance to knock. He stood outside holding a bouquet of assorted flowers and a bottle of red wine.

"Thank you," I said as he handed me the flowers. "Please come in."

Fane was dressed in his usual head to toe black.

I led him into the kitchen. "Mom, I'd like you to meet Fane."

Mom's mouth hung open. She looked at the dyed hair on his temples rather than his eyes. Then her head twisted abruptly when she saw the flowers in my hand.

Her alarm was quickly covered by a forced smile. "Nice to meet you, Fane."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Sky. Thank you for having me over." Fane walked into the kitchen and set the bottle of wine on the counter. "I brought this for you. I hope you drink red."

Actually, mom drank brown—as in soda. She'd never been much for wine. And what was a teenager doing bringing over a bottle of wine? It's not like Fane lived at home and could raid his parents' wine cabinet.

"Thanks," Mom said slowly.

I opened one of the bottom cabinets and rooted around for an empty vase for the flowers. When I found it, I filled it with a bit of water and set them in the center of the dinner table.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Fane asked my mom.

"No, I've got everything under control. …Thanks."

"Come on," I said, taking his hand. "We can hang out in my room until dinner's ready."

"Actually, Aurora, I need you to make a salad."

When my mom wasn't looking Fane winked at me. His smile made me want to drag him to my room and kiss him senseless.

"Sure, Mom," I said in an upbeat voice.

After fifteen minutes of Mom never leaving me alone with Fane, we sat down to dinner.

Fane dished up salad and passed on pot roast. "Smells wonderful, Mrs. Sky, but I don't eat meat."

Fane was losing big points with my mom. The way she looked at him, you'd think he'd just confessed to being a meth head. Mom helped herself to the roast and ate in silence. It wasn't like her to forgo conversation with a dinner guest. After a few minutes, she asked how Fane and I knew one another.

"Gym class," I said and scrunched up my nose. "I suppose it was our mutual loathing for physical education that drew us together."

Fane smiled. "Gym isn't so tough. I just sit back and watch the game."

I leaned back in my chair and smiled at my mom. "Fane's more of a spectator."

Mom's lips tightened.

I grinned wider when I glanced back at Fane. "But I suspect he's a closet athlete. You should have seen the way he pummeled his opponents the time he participated in badminton."

Fane shrugged. "I've played a game or two of badminton in my day."

He pushed the salad around on his plate. Watching him eat, or rather not eat, was like staring into a mirror of what I was like at the table. I felt so connected to this boy. I was glad he was there. I wished he could stay the night, and I didn't even mean that in a sexual way. I just felt better when he was nearby.

At the end of the meal, Fane helped clear the table and began washing the dishes.

Mom snatched a plate from him. "Don't worry about it. I'll take care of those."

I didn't like the way Mom looked at Fane, like he was trying to rifle through her china cabinet.

"Mom, we've got it," I said. "You cooked."

Okay, so usually I let her do both, but seeing Fane up to his elbows in soapy water looked so adorably domestic that I wanted to shoo my mom out and join him at the sink. She hesitated before retreating into the living room. The TV came on, turned at a low 'I can still hear you' volume. I grabbed a green terry kitchen towel and sat on the counter beside Fane.

The warm white frothy water slid down Fane's arm as he handed me plates. I didn't worry that I was grinning like an idiot because Fane was doing

the same.

"You're cute," he said.

I grinned. "I was just thinking the same about you."

Fane released the pan he'd been scrubbing and let it slip back into the sink. I dropped the kitchen towel. His arms circled my waist. He pulled me to his lips. I felt the wet grip of his arms soaking through my top. Fane backed me against the counter and bruised my lips with his hungry kiss. I gripped him around his neck and crushed my lips against his.

I wanted to wrap my legs around him. I wanted to grind against him and ease that invisible ache, but Mom had her ears open. Not that I cared at the moment. My needs overruled caution.

A gentle tug on my scarf caught my attention. Fane pulled the first layer around my neck.

I broke off our kiss. "Don't."

I glanced in the direction of the living room.

He nodded. "This isn't the place."

Fane returned to scrubbing dishes. Humor returned to his voice.

"I haven't done dishes in ages. It's rather therapeutic actually."

"Great, you're hired."

Fane nodded toward the living room. "So where's your dad?"

"I scared him off. We don't know when or if he's coming back."

"*You* scared him?"

I batted my eyelashes and spoke in a girlish voice, "Little ol' me, I can be quite a fright."

Fane laughed. "Whatever you say, Snow White."

After I'd dried and put away the last dish, Mom appeared in the dining room.

"Thanks for doing the dishes," she said evenly.

"No problem," I answered.

"Well, it's getting late," she prodded.

"Mom, it's not even nine."

"You were already up late last night…with Dante." Mom lifted her nose. I swear it was the first snub to ever leave her lips.

My jaw clenched. Before I could say another word, Fane glided from the kitchen to the adjoining dining room.

He smiled. "Thank you for having me over to dinner, Mrs. Sky. It was a pleasure meeting you." He turned. "Aurora, I'll see you at school tomorrow."

I tossed the kitchen towel on the counter. "I'll walk you out."

I didn't bother with my jacket. I had to stop myself from slamming the front door once we were outside.

"Sorry about my mom."

Fane just smiled. "She's looking out for you. I get it. I'll see you tomorrow."

He opened his car door, but I shut it before he could get in. His eyes

dropped to my lips as he grinned.

"I don't want to wait until tomorrow," I said.

I moved in for the kiss. Fane managed to steer me to the back door of the car, open it, and toss me in the back seat. He shut us inside the indestructible tank and hovered above me on his hands and knees. I did what I'd been longing to do—wrap my legs around his torso and pull him to me. He groaned. The sound was indescribable—like a soul in torment. I suspected it might kill him if he didn't have me right then.

It would serve my mother right if I had sex with Fane in our driveway after the way she chased him out. She never would have acted that way with Dante. She would have waited on Dante hand and foot and signed our marriage certificate all because he was the golden boy with the charming smile.

If she thought it was safer sending Fane away, she had no idea who I was anymore. I rocked against him. The springs dug into my back from under the old upholstery.

Fane pulled my top up just below my breasts and began trailing kisses down my stomach. I shivered and gasped. He reached for the scarf once more. He seemed more intent on getting it off than my pants.

I rolled my head side to side on the car bench. "No," I moaned. "No."

"Why not?" Fane asked huskily.

Because he couldn't see. He couldn't know. What would he think of me if he knew?

I sat up. "I should go back inside. I'll see you tomorrow."

I thought he'd protest, but Fane grinned and said, "I never thought I'd count down the hours until school started."

I kissed him quickly on the lips and crawled to the opposite door. When I turned around on the porch, Fane waved as he pulled out of the driveway. I waved back then ran inside and up the stairs before Mom could ruin my good mood.

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18
Call Of The Wild

Fane was waiting outside my English class when first period ended.

"Want to get out of here?"

No, Aurora. Just say no.

I smiled. "Yeah."

As we headed for the double doors, I caught a quick glimpse of Noel. Her eyes widened. She shouldn't look so surprised. Wasn't she the one who told me Scott Stevens was herbal tea? I would think Fane Donada was the type of guy who merited the Mouseketeer stamp of approval.

"Are you ready to try out the tank?" Fane asked when we reached his car.

He opened the passenger door for me. And they said chivalry was dead. Turns out it came in the most unexpected places.

I raised a brow before climbing in. "Where are we going?"

"Anywhere you want."

"How about Portage Glacier?"

"Hop in."

Oh, I was bad skipping class…again. This time I wasn't even staying on school property. It's not like I could concentrate on a word my teachers said, anyway. Not with Fane on the brain 24/7.

Math and science just didn't mean as much when I'd faced death three times. Four, counting Dante's driving.

Unlike Dante, Fane handled his car with care. I nearly giggled. Fane drove a piece of shit. He probably had to be gentle or she'd fall apart over the first speed bump.

Fane hadn't lied. The tank moved at a steady, slow speed, even after Fane got onto the highway going south.

I stared out the window as Fane wound his way along the base of the Chugach Mountains. The Seward Highway skirted the shores of the Turnagain Arm. Admittedly, I lived in one of the most beautiful places in the world. Still didn't mean I wanted to freeze my ass off half the year.

"I love this drive," I said.

"I'm impressed."

I raised a questioning brow.

"You seem completely at ease while I'm driving," Fane continued.

"I don't think it's you so much as the tank."

He smiled. "Are you hungry? I could pull off in Girdwood."

"No, keep driving."

I faced the ocean on the right. It was gray and full of silt-crusted icebergs floating in and out on the tide. I only looked away when Fane pointed out mountain goats on the left. He had an uncanny ability to spot them, even with

his eyes on the road.

The parking lot at Portage Glacier was empty when we pulled in.

My memories of the place were of the summer time and great glossy icebergs floating by in Portage Lake as Mom and I watched from the edge of the parking lot. The glacier itself had receded over three miles in the last century. I'd never walked across the frozen lake to the edge of the glacier in the winter, but now it sounded like a good idea.

I tightened my scarf before stepping onto the ice. I couldn't actually see it with all the snow coverage.

Fane drifted silently by my side. I felt like we were walking on the moon. There wasn't another human in sight. The lake was covered in snow that crunched beneath our shoes. Fane and I blazed a trail across the expanse of white.

We rounded a corner carved into the lake by a mountain and saw the glacier in the distance. I wondered if Fane was as drawn to that great river of ice as I was.

We walked up to the jagged edge of the glacier. Chunks of white ice glowed unnaturally blue. The pieces looked as though they were lit from within.

"This really is an amazing place," I said.

"It's the last frontier," Fane said.

"Too bad it's so cold and dark."

"Are you kidding? That's my favorite part."

"We should turn back," I said. "My bus is going to be leaving soon."

He laughed. "I can drive you home now, remember?"

"Yeah, I guess that's true. We should still turn back. I really need to do my homework. Oh, and start going to class. I don't want to spend my summer in school or worse…next school year at Denali."

The way to the glacier felt like a journey of many miles, but the way back was quick.

"What about you?" I asked. "Do you plan on going to college?" I sort of doubted it.

He shrugged. "I don't know. I hadn't really thought about it lately. I guess it's time to move on to a higher education. Meet new people."

"You mean friends who aren't junkies?"

"They aren't junkies."

I raised a brow.

"Well, I guess they are sort of junkies, but I can't judge them."

"What's your roommate into?"

"Besides foreign films and rare books—not much."

"Real barrel of sunshine he is," I said.

"He's depressed."

"Maybe Alaska's not the best place for him."

Fane huffed. "He's like that no matter where he goes."

"Have you been a lot of places together?"

"Before moving to Alaska we were roommates in New York."

I whistled. "Wow, New York to Alaska. I guess you really needed a change in scenery."

"Call of the wild," Fane said and laughed. "It was my dream to come out to the far north. One day, I told Joss I was moving and that he could join me or stay behind."

"Wow, you guys must be really…close."

I wasn't sure how to respond to that. Wasn't it kind of weird for two teenage guys to move across the country together?

"Joss lost his family, too. We've been rooming together for a long time."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

Fane squeezed my hand.

"Anyway, he wanted to check it out first, but I said I was moving—sight unseen. The decision was a bit tougher for Joss. You see, he loved New York's arts and culture, but hated the people. The idea of vast stretches of uninhibited land appealed to him…the lack of artistry and architecture was more difficult to swallow."

"We've got totems and igloos," I said, smiling.

Fane grinned back. "Joss is more of a Venus de Milo and Basilica di San Marco kind of guy."

"We have ice sculptures downtown."

Fane laughed. "You're tenacious. I thought you were sick of this state."

"It's still my home…and I still think it's beautiful. It's just…"

"Dark and cold?"

I nodded, but somehow I didn't mind so much anymore.

"I was about to come out looking for you," Mom said when I walked through the front door.

"Mom, I'm only forty minutes late."

"I was worried. You never answer your phone anymore."

"That's not true."

"What happened?"

"Nothing. Fane gave me a ride home." I kicked my boots off and shrugged out of my jacket. "My car phobia is cured. Isn't that great?"

You'd think my mom would look happier.

"Anyway, I'm home and I'm going to get started on homework," I said.

I headed upstairs without waiting for a response. I hadn't even had a chance to get through my English assignment when she came by to check on me later.

Her steps reached my back and stopped.

"What?" I asked when she didn't say anything. I turned in my chair to

face her.

"You have a friend downstairs to see you."

It had to be Fane. Why else would my mom's face look so pinched? I skipped ahead of her down the stairs, but found Noel waiting in the entryway.

"Hey," I said.

"Hi."

Her hood was pulled back, her arms were pressed at her sides, legs together, face bent down.

"Want to come up to my room?" I asked.

"Sure."

"This is Noel," I said to my mom as we passed her on the stairs.

"Hello," Mom said.

"Hi, Mrs. Sky." Noel looked at the floor when she spoke.

Once I had Noel in my room I shut the door. "Sorry I haven't been hanging for a while," I said. "I was suspended and then…well…" I shrugged and flashed her a dopey grin.

Noel looked around my room. She was probably realizing we didn't have much in common. I was just a normal high school girl. Well, not exactly normal, but it would appear that way.

I expected her to be annoyed with me, to accuse me of not really being one of them. What I wasn't expecting was for her sudden change in expression.

"Why didn't you tell me you were macking on a vampire?"

I felt the color drain from my face. "What?"

"Fane Donado." Noel arched a brow.

"What about him?"

Noel huffed in disgust. "What do you think, Aurora?"

Fane was nothing like Patrick, or Ivo, or the rabid lunatic.

He was just a high school boy…with dead parents, sharp back molars, and an immunity to cigarette smoke.

Normal.

All of a sudden my breathing went haywire. A succession of heavy gasps rasped up my throat as I fought for air. Oxygen wasn't going to my brain. I pulled at my neck.

Noel's leaned forward. "Aurora?"

"No." I clawed at my scarf. "It's not true. You're lying!" I shouted. "I don't believe you!"

Noel glanced at my door the louder I got. She walked over, contemplated me calmly, then slapped me across the face.

My cheek stung like a bitch. For such a petite stick of kindling, Noel packed a mean punch.

I put a hand on my cheek. "What the fuck, Noel!"

"Sorry. I was losing you. Are you telling me you didn't know Fane is a vampire?"

I did feel rather stupid now that she asked. *Fane*. I mean, come on, how thick was I? Conversations raced through my mind, all his odd little quirks, like the way he preferred the cold and dark and had no appetite for food. *I don't eat meat*. No, he just drank human blood. God, and his obsession with my scarf. It was probably like waving a red flag in front of a bull.

I shuddered.

I'd been lip-locking with a corpse. If Melcher knew, he'd probably tear the wooden cross off his wall and beat me with it.

"Of course he's a vampire," I said bitterly.

I was sure Noel had no idea what I was going through. In her world, having one's own personal suck buddy was probably the ultimate score, which made her humorless expression all the more confusing.

"This isn't good, Aurora."

I tried to read her eyes. "Why not?"

"Valerie, for one thing."

Jealousy raged inside my heart. How many love bites had Fane pressed into Valerie's skin? How many times had he sucked her blood? I bet she'd enjoyed every minute.

I leapt to my feet and snarled. "What does Valerie have to do with this?"

"She won't be happy you stole her man."

"That's none of her business."

Noel pushed herself off the carpet. "She has powerful friends."

"I'm not afraid of a fight."

Noel looked me in the eye. "You should be."

"Is that why you came here? To warn me?"

"Not just you."

For a moment I struggled to breathe again. "You can't mean she'd hurt Fane?"

An image of sharp, pointy objects whirled through my mind.

Noel shifted and shrugged weakly. "I don't know."

For some reason that answer was worse than yes or no. It became a statement of certainty.

"She can't do that! She can't just…"

She couldn't just…what exactly? Murder a vampire? That was my job.

I looked at Noel helplessly. She shrugged again. "I don't want anything to happen to Fane, either. He's one of the nice ones."

"Shit!" I said, pacing my room. "I need to talk to him."

"Aurora…"

"I need to talk to him now!" I turned suddenly. "You have to get me out of here."

"But Aurora…"

I pulled the dagger and sheath from the top drawer of my nightstand.

Her mouth fell open. "What are you doing with a knife?"

I sat on my bed and yanked the right pant leg of my jeans up. "Can't be

too safe. You know vampires, can't expect them to play nice all the time."

"But Fane..."

"Is capable of anything—just like the rest of them." I shoved the dagger into the holster around my leg. Didn't think I'd be needing it so soon. "It's one thing to get bitten, but a whole other to date one of those…things."

Noel looked at me curiously. "I just…How could you not know? I thought that's why you were with him."

Why else would I be with Fane? It was a fair question. Not one I was going to answer, but understandable.

I covered the dagger with my pant leg and stood up. "I'm ready."

"Aurora, please don't rush in like this."

"I'm just going to talk to him."

Noel looked at my leg. "Then why do you need a knife?"

"As a precaution." I breezed past her. "Let's go."

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19
Romance Is Dead

I told Mom I was going over to Noel's to study for a French test—no need for her to know Noel was taking Spanish. Noel drove me to Video City in her beat-up Volvo, begging me the entire way not to confront Fane. I was way ahead of her. I'd called him before we pulled out of the driveway and told him to meet me. It was hard to imagine that a couple hours earlier we had skipped school to go to Portage Glacier.

Before heading back to town we'd made out in his car. He'd had his tongue in my mouth. I shuddered again.

Noel pulled into a spot in front of Video City and said, "I'm waiting with you."

"Fine," I said.

I shivered. The vents were blasting cold air on us.

"And call as soon as you're done speaking to him."

"Yes, Mom," I said and laughed.

I stared at the movie posters in the window facing us. *Starship Troopers*. Seriously, ever think about updating to the twenty-first century?

Fane pulled in beside Noel. He looked over and gave her a nod. Noel lowered her head slightly.

I narrowed my eyes. "Do you two know each other?"

"Not well," she said.

"Has he ever…?" I suddenly began to ask, but couldn't finish the words.

"Fane? No, of course not. Fane's a one-woman kind of guy."

Except he wasn't a guy at all. He was a bloodsucking vampire who'd wandered far from his grave. Worse yet, he didn't trust me enough to tell me.

"Aurora…" Noel said as I opened the door to get out.

I forced a smile. "I'll be fine."

"Call me later."

Once I slipped inside the Catalina I stared forward. I was afraid if I looked at Fane my face would betray me.

"So what's going on?" he asked.

"We need to talk, but not here."

"Where do you want to go?"

"The bluff."

Fane put the car in reverse and headed to the ocean. "Sure you can't tell me what this is about?"

I shook my head.

After a spell Fane asked, "How do you know Noel Harper?"

"Funny, I was just asking her the same thing about you."

Fane's fingers, which were loosely steering, now wrapped around the

wheel tightly. His voice turned silky. “And what did she tell you?”

I kept my silence. Fane cut through the airport and come out on Point Woronzof Road paralleling the coastal trail. On our way to the bluff, I pointed out a trail access surrounded by dense woods.

“Pull in here.”

Point Woronzof was a popular place to make out or access the beach. I wanted something more secluded. Well, maybe not that secluded. By now it was almost four in the afternoon. The sun would set in another forty-five minutes.

The trees surrounded the deserted parking lot, shading the last gray hues before total darkness. Fane pulled into a spot in the far corner against the woods.

“So?”

“When were you planning on telling me you’re a vampire?”

Fane squinted at me. “I thought you knew.”

“Why in the hell would you think that?”

Fane waved his hand at my neck. “The red scarf. I thought it was your way of signaling to me.”

“Not even!” I shook my head. “I can’t believe this.”

Now what? What would Melcher instruct me to do in a situation like this? This was different. This wasn’t a mission. This was Fane.

His body tensed and the soft features of his face hardened. His words were silky smooth, without a trace of surprise. He even had the insolence to sound amused. “You chose to confront me in this dark, isolated location, alone in my car? What is it, Aurora—bravery or the thrill of danger?”

“I’m not afraid of you.”

“Good because I could never hurt you. I might want to sleep with you and suck your blood, but I’d never hurt you.”

“Stop it.”

He turned in his seat to face me. I didn’t like the way he looked me up and down. “Don’t tell me you don’t want it, too.”

“I could never sleep with you.”

I hadn’t meant to sound so repulsed. Did vampires have feelings? I mean, if they were immune to bodily harm, perhaps their emotions were equally deadened.

I didn’t have to wonder for long. The Fane I knew disappeared, replaced by a big-headed brute—or maybe he was just being a guy—who slouched back as though impervious to words or emotions. “Now you don’t want to do the dirty because I’m a vampire? Usually that’s a turn-on for girls.”

I bet it was. I bet girls like Valerie got off on a good fuck and suck.

“Oh? And how many girls have you been with?”

I tried to sound as detached as him, even though he had hurt me more than he could know, and worse, after claiming he never could.

It took him what? All of ten seconds?

"I've been around a long time."

Fane pulled down his visor. A pack of American Spirits landed in his open palm. Fane pushed a car lighter into the socket on the dashboard. Within seconds, the metal cylinder popped out.

Somehow this infuriated me more than Fane's countless line of lovers. "So you're smoking again?"

"Depends. Are you breaking up with me?"

"You're joking. You're threatening me with a cigarette?"

Fane shrugged and lit up. Guess he was making the decision for me. In the end, guys were all the same whether they'd been around for eighteen years or eight hundred.

The moment his cigarette caught fire I felt myself spark with rage. I threw the car door open and got out. I slammed it shut with both hands. The smash of metal was somewhat satisfying. I began taking off across the empty lot.

Fane would either speed away or chase after me. I figured he would go for the hunt, since he was a vampire.

I just wasn't expecting it so soon.

He jumped out of the car right after me. I saw him flick the cigarette across the snowy lot. He locked eyes with me, and a shiver ran down my spine.

I bolted.

Bright idea, Aurora, let's make this even more exciting for the vampire.

I wasn't a complete dolt. I had my dagger and something even more lethal—my blood. He wanted to bite me. I could feel it with every beat of my heart. And if he did…

That thought alone made me run faster.

I crashed through the woods. Adrenaline was a powerful thing. In normal circumstances, I would have tripped over a stump by now. Instead, I leapt over fallen trunks and dashed through the trees toward the ocean. And what would I do there? Swim across to Fire Island? I wouldn't make it thirty feet before hypothermia set in.

I couldn't risk looking behind me, and I couldn't hear Fane through the pounding of my heart, which drummed inside my ears. My blood was beckoning him. An inexplicable thrill shot through my body.

When I ran into a clearing on the bluff I stopped suddenly and whirled around.

My body trembled, but it wasn't from fear or cold. Our eyes locked, stopping Fane in his tracks twenty feet away.

We stared each other down like two combatants about to duel. Fane started toward me. The important thing, I reminded myself, was not to show any fear. But for all my feigned courage, I couldn't move.

Fane took advantage of my hesitation to close the remaining distance between us. He yanked me to him with both hands. It was difficult to tell if he

meant to caress or attack me. His hands ran down my back.

Fane pulled at my scarf as he whispered in my ear. “I’m dying to taste you.” His words left hot marks on my skin.

I pushed at him, but he gripped me harder and ripped off my scarf. The fabric pooled over the snow like a stain. I struggled and was just about to reach for the dagger when Fane released his hold on me.

I pitched forward, falling to my hands and knees in the snow.

Fane stood over me blinking.

“You’ve already been bitten.”

The cold air prickled my neck. It was like someone had cut off my hair and left me completely exposed.

Fane’s gaze fixated on my neck. At least he didn’t look as though he wanted to bite me anymore. I probably could have used stitches where Ivo bit me. Since I had the scarf to hide the wound, it wasn’t carefully covered up with powder or foundation.

Fane’s fingers trembled when he reached for my neck. “Who did this to you?”

“A vampire.”

He didn’t smile. “Who was it?”

I studied his side profile in the dying light. “Why? Do you know every vampire in Alaska?”

Wait, would I be required to report that information back to Agent Melcher? Maybe it was better if he didn’t answer.

Fane’s eyes narrowed. “That bite mark is fresh.”

I lowered my chin and tried to look at it, which was ridiculous—there was no way I could see my own neck. It was better than looking Fane in the eye when he was staring at me as though I’d cheated on him.

“I didn’t go out of my way to get this!” Okay, that was a lie, but it’s not like I wanted to be bitten. I’d rather jab a needle in my arm than get gnawed on by creepy killers.

Fane bent down slowly for the scarf and handed it to me from two feet away. “Come on, you must be freezing.”

The snow seemed thicker on the walk back.

Fane turned on the heat once we got inside his car. “Noel Harper dragged you to one of Marcus’s parties, didn’t she?”

I really had to meet this Marcus and check out one of his after hour parties. They were the talk of the town, at least among the undead and their cohorts.

A look of rage crossed Fane’s face. “Aurora?” he said carefully. “A couple days ago you had a bruise on your forehead. Did someone force himself on you?”

I stared out the windshield, weighing my options. From a sitting position, I could ease my hand down my leg and retrieve the dagger under my pant leg. I didn’t want to hurt him, though. It was hard enough killing evil vampires.

Would the agents ever ask me to kill nice ones like Fane?

"Have you ever killed anyone?" I asked suddenly.

"What?" Fane scowled. "No."

Before he could ask about the bite again I said, "Look, any girl who hangs out with Noel and her friends ends up getting bitten."

Fane's features began to vanish in the dimming light. It was the end of January, and we were up to seven hours and forty minutes of daylight, not that it was noticeable on overcast days like this. The grayness had a calming effect…until Fane punched the dashboard. It made me jump.

"I can't stand it!" he cried. "I can't stand the thought of someone else biting you."

"Hey, I didn't like it either."

He turned to me. "You didn't?"

"It was disgusting."

"But most people…"

"I said it was disgusting!"

Fane settled back into his seat and stared forward. "Is that what you think of me? That I'm disgusting?"

I sighed and shrank back in the seat.

My voice came out so much quieter than I'd intended. "I wanted to…but I can't."

His fists tightened around the steering wheel.

I hugged myself in my arms. "Don't ever bite me, though."

I couldn't tell if Fane was nodding or shaking his head. "Do you want me to take you home?"

"Not yet."

"Do you want to stay parked a bit longer?"

Parking inevitably led to one thing—making out—and it probably went against every code of honor for a vampire hunter to have relations with a vampire. But who cared? It wasn't like Melcher had made me recite any vows. Fane wasn't a killer. He was just…dead.

I turned my eyes away from the oppressive trees. "Can we go to your place?"

"My place? That's fine, but I have to warn you, my roommate isn't hospitable."

"Honestly, I could do without the pleasantries tonight."

Fane pulled onto Postmark Drive, skirting cargo hangars and the big FedEx Express Center. We passed my street and headed toward Denali High, passing it before pulling into a nearby neighborhood.

"You live this close to school and you don't walk?"

"Walk?" Fane repeated. "I wouldn't be caught dead walking to school." He laughed.

He pulled the tank into the right side of a one-story duplex and made no movement to vacate the vehicle.

I looked over when he didn't get out. "What?"

"How did you figure out I was a vampire?"

"Noel told me. I don't know why I didn't figure it out, myself. I mean, *'Fane.'* Kind of obvious, don't you think?"

"It's spelled with an 'e.' not a 'g.'"

"You're right, that makes all the difference." It felt good to laugh, even briefly. I nodded at the garage door. "Does your roommate get the garage?"

Fane grunted. "You could say that. It's full of his books. He's a rare books dealer—sells online. That's how we cover our expenses."

I bit down softly on my lower lip. "Oh, right, I didn't think about that. You still have to make a living. So what are you doing at Denali High?"

Fane stretched his hands on the steering wheel. "Every few decades I enroll in school to check out how things have changed. Joss hates society, but it fascinates me. I miss being part of it. Besides, it's the best place to pick up chicks."

My voice rose. "Skating on thin ice." Still, I was happy we were joking again.

Fane chuckled.

"So, how does twenty-first-century high school compare to the fifties or eighties or whenever you were last in school?"

"It's changed a lot. I'll tell you, I sympathize with the teachers. These days they have cell phones and guns to contend with…I think cell phones are worse."

"And your roommate doesn't mind you playing school boy while he brings home the bacon?"

"Joss doesn't bring home anything. I have to do all the leg work. Drive him around to garage sales, mail packages, fetch supplies…"

"He doesn't drive?"

"He refuses to learn—said automobiles are just another destructive invention of mankind. It didn't matter in New York. No one drives in the city." Fane looked over. "Sure you want to come inside? Or are you stalling?"

"I'm sure."

We got out of the car and approached the front door. I didn't see any boarded-up windows.

"Welcome to my lair," Fane said as we walked in.

As my eyes adjusted to the dim lighting, it wasn't the antique furniture I focused on, but the pair of unfriendly eyes regarding me as though I were vermin crawling around his feet by the couch. There was a white porcelain mug on the end table by his side. The mug and scowl on his face were all lit by a glass iron lamp on the table. I recognized Joss from outside the video store.

"What is she doing here?" he demanded.

"What do you think? She's my guest, and she's come for a visit."

"What happened to the other girl?"

"I ate her." Fane chuckled and turned to me. "You'll have to excuse my roommate. A hundred years and he's still not socialized. Aurora, meet my immortal companion, Josslyn."

"So then…she knows what happened to us." Josslyn looked me over in disgust as though *I* was the foul creature in this scenario.

Hello? Me, human. You, walking corpse.

"Nice to meet you, Joss," I said.

"My name is Josslyn."

"Kind of girly."

He narrowed his eyes. "I don't like you."

"Don't take it personally," Fane said to me. "Joss hates all humans."

"Hey, as long as he's not killing them."

Joss closed the book nestled in his lap. "*Me* kill?" He looked at Fane, eyes narrowed. "Perhaps your new companion ought to hear about the mass murder that took place in my village. It wasn't vampires doing the slaughtering."

Fane rolled his eyes. "As charming as that story is, let's save it for another night."

"Is that blood in your mug?" I asked, nodding toward the porcelain cup.

"Certainly not!"

"It's Earl Grey," Fane said.

"You're drinking tea?" I raised both brows.

Joss glared at me. "I'd rather consume strychnine than *human* blood."

I turned to Fane. "How long can you go without feeding?"

"Months, but I don't know what vampire would want to. The cravings are intense—like no other addiction. As far as health goes, a regular diet of blood gives us strength and quicker healing capabilities."

"What about super powers?"

Joss snorted.

"Aside from heightened senses, fast healing, and the whole living forever thing; we're more or less human." Fane shrugged. "Joss would know the answer to your question about feeding better. I believe he's set the record for the longest fast."

A light bulb went off in my head. "Oh, like a tick."

"Excuse me?" Joss said.

"Ticks can live for seven years without feeding."

"Francesco," Joss said testily. "She's comparing me to an insect."

Fane grinned. "Yes, I heard."

Joss stood up. "I'll be in my room." He took his book and tea with him and slammed a door somewhere down the hall.

Fane spread his arm toward the couch. "Have a seat."

I settled onto the couch and looked at Fane. "How old are you?"

"Me? Gosh." He scratched his head. "I was born in 1755. I guess that would make me…two hundred and fifty-eight."

"Well, you don't look a day above twenty," I teased. "Where are you from originally?"

"Italy."

"But you have no accent."

"Not anymore. I didn't stick around long. Made my way to England, which is where I learned English."

"You don't sound British, either. Not like Joss. Your name makes a lot more sense now. Francesco."

Fane screwed up his face. "Now you know why I go by Fane."

"And I thought you were being ironic."

I shouldn't be at his house with him. I shouldn't be with him at all, but I couldn't imagine being anywhere else. I was gathering intel. That's all. Going deep undercover. What better way to learn everything I could about vampires than from the creature itself?

I faltered. Looking at Fane now, I couldn't think of him as a creature. My insides still thrummed at his nearness. Even now, I wanted to straddle him on the couch and kiss him back to life. It was wrong to want a vampire. So very wrong.

I switched back to teasing. "You're so obvious, you know? What's with the long leather jacket? Kind of cliché, don't you think?"

"This?" Fane opened his arms and looked down. "What's wrong with following fashion trends? Frankly, I like it a lot better than the bulky cuffs and full-skirted frock coats of the eighties."

"Eighties?"

"Oh, right, pardon, 1780s. And don't get me started on top hats." Fane took his jacket off and draped it over an armchair before settling on the couch beside me. "These are great times—for instance, you've got jeans and sunglasses and I can't tell you how much I love cotton—so soft and unconstricting."

I turned to him. "What about the smoking?"

"Are you kidding? It's the easiest way to meet people."

"So you're not addicted to nicotine?"

Fane let out a deep, throaty laugh. "It's the habit I enjoy." He leaned in closer. "There's only one thing I'm addicted to." His eyes shone as he perused the skin above my scarf. He leaned in closer and inhaled me, his lips hovering above my skin.

"Don't," I whispered.

His eyes were hazy. I stood up. "I should get going."

His eyes slowly cleared. He got up and put his jacket on.

Silence followed us on the drive home. My emotions were too jumbled to talk, my thoughts tangled up until nothing coherent could be pulled out of them.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Fane asked as he turned onto Century

Heights.

"I'm tired." Not that I expected to get any sleep that night.

He threw the Pontiac into park in my driveway and looked at me. "So are we good?"

"I don't know," I answered. "I need time to think about all of this."

Fane tapped his fingers lightly on the steering wheel. "How much time?"

"What do you mean how much time? You have all the time in the world."

Fane took his eyes off his fingers and looked straight at me. "That doesn't make the seconds away from you go by any faster."

My heart skittered. I drew in a breath and nearly forgot to release it. "You shouldn't say things like that."

"But it's the truth."

It was all I could do to get out of the car and make it to the front door without looking back. I lay awake all night thinking about Fane. I thought about him being around for over three centuries and all the changes he'd seen.

Mostly, though, I replayed the chase through the woods. But instead of the scarf he ripped down my jeans and made love to me in the fallen snow.

Every part of me tingled.

I was seriously screwed.

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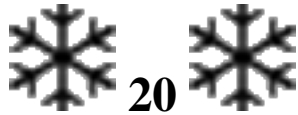

20
Code Red

"You are the luckiest girl ever!" Hope said when I met the Mouseketeers for lunch in front of their lockers. "How did you manage to snag Fane Donado?"

I sat on the ground between Hope and Whitney and stretched my legs across the hall, my back up against the lockers. Noel sat Indian style a foot away, hooded head bent down like the grim reaper.

"It wasn't exactly planned," I admitted.

Whitney pouted. "You're not going to want to party with us now. Not when you have your own little private party for two."

"So you and Fane are still going out?" Noel asked.

I couldn't see Noel's eyes from under her hood. "Yeah, I mean we talked and…" And I didn't know what else to say.

What I needed right then was to reestablish some good habits—normal habits—like attending class.

I also needed to study and get my homework done.

That was the plan anyway when I walked up the hill after school. Right up until I found Dante's white Rubicon parked in our driveway.

Okay. Now I was getting seriously annoyed. I was actually trying to get back on track if people would just let me.

Then a thought occurred to me.

Did Dante know about Fane? No. He couldn't.

"I'm home!" I yelled once I got inside.

"We're in the kitchen," Mom called back cheerfully.

I shrugged out of my backpack and jacket and casually strolled into the kitchen. "Hi, Mom. Hi, Dante, I wasn't expecting you."

He leaned against the counter and shoved a leftover brownie into his mouth. He actually swallowed before responding. "Hey, Sky. We've got a Code Red down at the station. Agents want us both in now."

I moved across the room so he wouldn't catch my shiver. "What's going on?"

"Don't know yet."

"I hope everything's okay," Mom said.

"Don't worry, Mrs. Sky. We can handle anything."

"Oh," she said with a smile. "I'm sure you can."

Dante turned to me. "Ready, Sky?"

"Do I need to bring anything?"

"Nope."

I turned to my mom. "I don't know when I'll be back."

"Take your time," Mom said.

"Where's Tommy Moe?" I asked as I clicked my seatbelt on.

"I left him at home."

"Oh." I wouldn't have minded some furry comfort at the moment.

"Don't look so worried, Sky. From your face you'd think you just got caught with your hand in the cookie jar."

I grimaced. He was closer to the truth than he knew.

The Jeep zoomed backward onto the road and turned down the drive. Once on Jewel Lake Road, I watched him shift down, over, up, and down. We lurched forward then flew down Minnesota Avenue.

"So you don't know what this is about?"

"Nope, but we'll find out soon enough. Melcher loves to toss in a Code Red every now and then. He takes this all very seriously, you know."

Apparently Dante and I were the last ones to arrive at the party—a rather startling surprise party that included…

"Noel?!"

Noel looked grim-faced sitting in front of Melcher's desk. To her left I saw Valerie, dressed in a turtleneck and a pair of tall boots pulled over tight jeans. Her hair cascaded in red waves down her shoulders. She leaned against the wall, arms folded. My heart dropped.

Busted.

Melcher smiled when he saw me. "Come in, Aurora. Have a seat." He indicated the spot next to Noel.

If Valerie was standing, so was I.

"Hi, Aurora," Noel said, barely audible.

Agent Crist raised a brow. "You two know each other?"

"We're friends," I said.

Valerie scoffed at this. She looked right over me to address Noel. "And you didn't suspect her? Fine informant you are."

"Ladies, ladies," Dante said, laughing. "Let's play nice." He crossed over to Crist's desk and settled on the edge. "So, what's with the little powwow?"

"Team, we have two problems," Agent Melcher said. "Usually we don't gather informants and agents in the same room. Withholding identities within the organization is vital and not doing so could cost someone their life, but we're making an exception because Valerie identified you, Aurora."

I looked quickly at Valerie and then back at Melcher.

"Valerie's one of our top informants and an uncannily perceptive one at that," Melcher said, proudly.

Perceptive, my ass.

Valerie's eyes narrowed. "Actually, I thought you were a vampire."

My jaw dropped. "So you tried to call in a hit on my life?"

Melcher chuckled. "Valerie does enjoy a prompt assassination—makes her feel like part of the team."

Valerie lifted her nose. “Who can blame me? Look how pale she is. Even in Alaska, that’s pushing it. Then there was her accident on the road. One moment the kids at school are whispering about how Aurora Sky was in a fatal car crash, the next she’s in class without a dent on her.”

I glared at Valerie. This had nothing to do with the paleness of my skin and everything to do with a certain vampire. Of course, I couldn’t mention any of this, and she knew it. If she wanted to tell the agents about Fane, she would have done so already.

And if I truly had been a vampire, she would have happily seen me staked through the heart.

I could already see she was over whatever initial disappointment she must have felt when Agent Melcher explained I was one of their own. She still had me at her mercy. What was the punishment for dating a vampire? Death? Mine was questionable. Fane’s was certain.

I wanted to rip Valerie’s throat out, but I needed her to talk to me first.

“Let’s get to the first order of business.” Melcher said. “Valerie, Noel, we have reports of the infected prowling the halls at West High. I want one of you to transfer and identify every last one of them.”

Valerie lifted her nose in the air. “I’m not leaving Denali.”

Noel’s voice quivered. “But all my friends are there.”

“You can make new friends,” Valerie said.

Melcher spoke up. “That’s enough. Noel, you’re transferring to West first thing Monday.”

Noel’s face dropped. “Yes, sir.”

“Once you track down the predators, I’ll meet with you and Sky to talk strategy.”

Guess Noel and I would be partying together after all.

“Now that everything’s cleared up, you two can leave.” Melcher looked from Noel to Valerie. “I need to have a word with my assassins.”

Noel hurried out of the room. Valerie pushed away from the wall, locking eyes with me as she left. Crist stood up and closed the door behind them. Melcher folded his hands over his desk.

I’d been holding my breath without releasing it. I pulled in air slowly.

“I’ve got bad news,” Melcher said. “This is serious, gang.”

Dante folded his arms and leaned forward. “Psycho vampire on the loose?” He thought a moment and snapped his fingers. “Renegade vampire army?”

“Janine’s dead.”

After the initial shock wore off I looked at Dante. His face was a blank mask.

“How?” he asked.

“She was found dead in her dorm room, both arms broken, trauma to the head, blood drained.”

Janine bludgeoned to death. Great time for my imagination to go graphic.

I sank into a chair.

Dante's jaw was tight. "Who did this?"

"We don't know," Crist said.

"Obviously we know *what* did it," Melcher said. "What we don't know is if Janine told it anything."

Dante propelled himself off the desk. "Shit!"

Crist frowned and glanced at the cross on the wall.

"I want a name," Dante said. "I'm going to personally send this creature back to his grave."

"We're working on it," Melcher said. "But in the meantime, both you and Sky need to be on high alert."

My pulse slowed. You'd think it would quicken right about now, rather than retreat into hiding. I felt faint. "Does this vampire know who we are?"

"We don't know, but it's a possibility we can't rule out."

I nodded slowly. "I think I need some air."

"Go on, Sky," Dante said. "I'll meet you in the parking lot in a moment."

I hurried down the hallway, in a rush to get out of the compound as quickly as possible. Just being there reminded me of the white room and the vampire lunatic. Now I was sick with the thought of what happened to Janine. It overshadowed my own fear of being targeted. And I thought I had problems before. Not only had I been made aware of Fane's condition, but now Valerie was onto us.

She was waiting for me in the parking lot, a Capri Slim between two fingers. Just what I needed right then.

I sidestepped her as she tried to blow smoke in my face.

I looked Valerie up and down. "The agents told me there were vampires, but they didn't mention anything about witches."

Valerie glared at me. "Maybe the agents didn't explain to you that you're supposed to take down vampires, not date them." She dropped her cigarette and crushed it under her boot.

"And shouldn't you be turning them in?" I countered.

"Do you want me to turn Fane in?"

I saw straight through the sweetness of her tone.

"No," I admitted.

"Then break it off," Valerie said smoothly.

I should have been relieved that she was offering to keep him secret from the agents, but relief was not what I felt inside my chest at the moment. The despair was so intense I itched to grasp the area over my heart and squeeze until it stopped hurting so much.

"You mean…"

"Break. Up. With. Him."

I ground my teeth together so hard they ached when I released. "So you can swoop back in?"

"Just remember, as long as Fane's with me he's safe." Valerie tossed her

hair over her shoulder. She walked to her car, a shiny red Honda Civic that zoomed out of the lot, leaving behind a cloud of exhaust.

I didn't need to jump in place to keep warm as I waited for Dante—I was fuming. I always knew Valerie was heinous bitch. And now she thought she could blackmail me. Well, actually, she could. What was I going to do about it? What could I do? And why the hell did she think she could be with Fane if I couldn't?

I sobered up when Dante walked out. I knew there were more serious things to worry about than breaking up with Fane, though they didn't feel nearly as important.

Dante lifted his chin when he saw me. We got inside the Rubicon and he stared through the window shield into the lot before starting her up.

"Dante…I'm sorry." It seemed we were both losing someone we cared about.

"Don't worry, Sky. Janine would never rat us out."

"What about those two guys at the party?"

"I'm going to hunt them down this weekend. Wanna come?"

Not a bad idea. Break up with Fane then skip town. My life just kept getting better and better.

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21
Love Bites

I waited until the eleventh hour to call Fane.

Chicken shit.

I dialed his number, heart in my throat. I'd rather do this in person, but I remembered how well that went last time.

"Aurora."

He sounded so happy to hear from me. It made what I had to say that much worse.

"I'm headed out of town again."

"Fairbanks?"

"Unfortunately."

"When?"

"In a little bit."

"When are you getting back?"

"Don't know."

Fane released a deep breath. "I've missed you."

"Me, too."

I knew what Valerie wanted—for this to be a messy breakup so Fane would run right back into her arms for comfort. If only Valerie was a vampire. I'd ram a stake right through her evil heart.

"Fane…"

"I know what I am, but I didn't choose to be this way. In the end, I'm just a boy—a boy who doesn't get any older or die but still human—and I want to be with you as long as possible."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

This was my cue to reveal Valerie's evil plot. Did I take it? No. Because there was no way to tell him without confessing my own dark secret. If I told him we'd be history anyway. I was the real killer.

"I'm seeing someone else."

"What? Who?"

I couldn't speak for a moment, shocked I'd said the words. It wasn't part of the plan.

"Who is he?" Fane asked.

"I'm so sorry, Fane," I said very softly. "You mean a great deal to me."

"Who is he?"

"Dante."

Yep, that was spontaneous as well.

"Dante," Fane spit out. "You mean the big *brother* type?"

I winced. "I guess I started seeing him as more than that. I don't want to

hurt you, but Dante and I have a lot in common, and he won't look like he's twenty when I'm eighty. How long do you think we'd last, anyway?"

"So that's it then? And this Dante character's going to stick around until you're eighty?"

"Probably not, but at least it's a possibility."

"I can't believe this. We need to talk…in person."

My body shuddered with a sensation that was more pleasure than fear.

"Let me pick you up."

"I can't. I'm about to leave."

The soft lilt of Fane's voice hardened. "With Dante?"

"With Dante," I repeated. "I'm sorry."

"I've got to go."

"Fane…"

It was good he hung up because I don't know what I would have said had he stayed on the line. That, and I felt the waterworks coming on. Breaking things off probably wouldn't sound so convincing if I started blubbering over the phone.

I threw myself face down onto my bed and wailed into the pillow.

"Aurora!" my mom called from downstairs. "Aurora, why don't you come down and have some lunch before you leave?"

I willed her to leave me alone, but eventually my mom made her way to my room. "Aurora? What's the matter?"

I sniffed several times to clear my nose. "It's not like you'd care."

"What happened?"

I turned my head away from her. "I broke up with Fane."

"Oh, honey." Mom patted my back as she held me in a half-hug. "I'm sorry to see you upset."

That's all she cared about. *Seeing* me upset. Listening to her try to sympathize with me was torture, especially the part where she said she thought it was for the best.

"Dante's going to be here soon. Let's get you cleaned up."

Mom led me to the bathroom. My face did feel like a splotchy horror. I'd rather not have Dante on my case the whole eight hours up to Fairbanks, or five, depending how fast he drove. I splashed my face with cool water in the sink and patted it dry with the hand towel Mom handed me.

I didn't need a mirror to see I still looked like a mess. I could see it in the way Mom looked at me.

"I have some concealer," she said.

"No, no make-up." I combed my hair forward with my fingers. At least part of my face was covered.

I hung out in the kitchen for the remaining hour, just waiting for the doorbell to ring. When it did, I flinched.

"Ah, here's Dante," Mom said cheerfully.

She rushed past me to let him in. He stayed on the porch and nodded to

her in hello.

She smiled. “Dante, it’s so good to see you again.”

“And you, Mrs. Sky. Always a pleasure.”

Mom giggled and blushed.

I brushed past her. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Do you have your phone?” Mom asked.

“Yes.”

“Be safe.”

“What’s with the boo-hoo face?” Dante asked the moment we were shut inside his Rubicon.

I twisted in my seat to give Tommy Moe pets.

I grumbled. “I can’t believe I have to nurse a broken heart with you for company.”

“Broken heart? Did some guy mistreat you, Sky? I’ll kick his ass to kingdom come.”

“It was my doing. I broke up with him.”

“Then he must have deserved it.”

“Not really.”

“So what’s the deal?”

“Nothing good could have come from being with him. Whether it was now or later, it had to be done.”

“You’re one tough cookie, Sky. That’s one of the things I admire about you. You’re able to make tough choices—no matter what the price.”

“That seems like all we do—make sacrifices.”

“Naw.”

As we were cruising down Fifth Avenue, Dante suddenly threw on his blinker and pulled into a Wendy’s. He zoomed into the drive-through.

“What are you doing?”

“It’s a long drive and I’m hungry. You want anything?”

“God, no,” I said, scrunching my nose. “And if I did it wouldn’t be this junk.”

“Suit yourself.” Dante rolled down his window when he pulled up to the order speaker. “I’ll take a double bacon cheeseburger, large fries, and a chocolate Frosty.” Dante looked over the menu and turned to me. “Want some apple slices? They’ve got apple slices.”

I shook my head.

“No milkshake? What happened to binge eating when you’re feeling down?”

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t need to puke on top of everything else.”

Dante pulled up to the pickup window to collect his bag of fast food. He unwrapped the cheeseburger before getting back onto Fifth and tossed the

bacon slices back to Tommy. Only Dante could manage to steer, shift gears, and stuff a burger in his face. When the burger was finished, Dante jammed fingers full of fries into his mouth and chewed loudly.

He noticed me watching and held the fries toward me. "Want some?"

I wrinkled my nose. "No, I'm good."

Soon, we were on the Glenn Highway. This time, I could actually see the landscape waltzing by. We careened past the miles of fenced forest along the base, skirted mountains and woods, and crossed over rivers.

"I won't be able to go back," I said.

"Where?"

"To Denali."

"This guy really got to you, didn't he?"

"Yeah."

I looked out the window.

"I could enroll at West with Noel." I paused. "You probably think I'm a real coward."

"Not at all. From Dante's Guide to Life: If you no longer like the scenery, change it. Keep moving is what I say." Dante tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. "So you're friends with Noel, but not Valerie?"

"She's more like my arch nemesis."

"Too bad, she's really cute."

I ground my teeth together. "Let's be clear, if you ever hooked up with Valerie I'd never speak to you again."

"Whoa," Dante said and laughed. "What did this chick do to you?"

"She's about to steal my boyfriend…or ex-boyfriend anyway." I guess there was no harm in telling Dante part of the truth. I'd just leave out the bit about Fane being a vampire.

"She's a badass," Dante said in admiration.

"I stole him first."

"Then you're the badass." Dante sounded even more impressed. "Nothing like a bit of juicy assassin/informant rivalry to entertain the mind on the long drive ahead."

I leaned back in my chair and folded my arms. "I'm done talking about Valerie."

"Come on. How did you steal her man out from under her?"

I shrugged. "He came to me."

Dante chuckled. "I don't doubt it."

I changed the subject. "It's all fine and good to say I'll just transfer, but I'm going to spend my last semester of senior year utterly friendless."

"Two words for you, Sky: track team."

"Track team?"

"Join the track team, win at the meets, and you're golden. Take it from your officially appointed mentor. I know what I'm talking about."

"You're forgetting one thing. I suck at sports."

"Ah, maybe the Aurora of yore sucked at sports, but new superhuman Sky is a champion. Vampire blood, remember? It's in us, it enhances us—can't let that extra boost go to waste, can we?"

"Doesn't track start in the spring?"

"So even better—start with cross country. I remember being on the cross country team," Dante said wistfully. "Meets, competitions, parties, girls… well, boys for you. You'll have it made."

I stared out the window. "Maybe I'll look into it."

I cleared my throat. "So you located these two guys from the party?"

Dante produced a grunt of disgust. "Apparently one of them overdosed right after we left. I did get an address on the second guy, Thomas Parks—lives at home."

"So we're just going to barge in on his family."

He smiled. "Single mom. Works all the time. I checked."

Dante made several pit stops, including his favorite pullout where, even in the daylight, we couldn't see Mount Denali through the clouds.

"One of these times, Sky," he said.

Once we reached Fairbanks, Dante drove straight for a rundown ranch house and parked in front on the street. He kept the engine running. It was either that or risk it dying in the subzero conditions without a plug in.

"Stay in the car," Dante said. "I'll be back in a sec."

Fine by me. If I could take out two vicious vampires on my own, Dante could handle a half-dazed suck junkie.

Outside my window, Dante walked smoothly across the snow-covered yard on a path blazed by footsteps. The rest of the driveway hadn't been shoveled. There was a concrete rectangle where a car had been parked. Dante walked onto the porch and bent over the door handle. I started to shiver even though the heat was blasting through the vents.

Dante opened the door and pushed into the house. Just as quickly, he shut it behind him.

Tommy's tongue slid back and forth between his teeth. I turned the radio on and off. I started humming.

When Dante came out the front door dragging a black-hooded body with him, I grasped the handle of the Jeep and jumped out.

"Hurry up! Open the back."

I nearly slipped on the ice, rushing to the rear of the Jeep. I don't know how Dante expected to stuff a body in his shoebox sized trunk, but he did.

Surprisingly, Thomas didn't struggle.

"Sedative for the ride," Dante said as if reading my mind.

We hopped into the front seats, and I couldn't stop shaking.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Moving him to another location to interrogate him."

"The cabin?"

"Yep."

I looked over my shoulder. Tommy breathed heavily then stopped when I stared at him.

"Is there a reason Tommy doesn't find any of this alarming?" I asked.

Dante's face softened. "Tommy's just a big teddy bear."

I guess that made Dante the grizzly.

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22
Interrogation

Being back inside that cabin was eerie. Our mugs from the previous weekend were turned over on a kitchen towel on the counter. The bed in the corner was made. Dante got to work making a fire.

Once it flickered to life, he straightened up.

"Time to bring in Thomas."

"Need help?"

"Nah, he's a light weight."

Dante's retreating footsteps echoed over the floorboards. I rubbed my hands together in front of the fire, but it offered no heat.

The cabin door flew open, hitting the wall with a *bang*.

Dante dragged Thomas by the shoulders and dumped him on a chair.

"Tape his arms and legs to the chair will you?"

I rummaged around in the kitchen drawers until I found a roll of duct tape.

No one had ever trained me in the art of taping a hostage to a chair before. I started by pulling Thomas's arms around the seatback.

The tape made a ripping noise as I pulled long stretches of it from the roll.

"Make it tight," Dante said.

I held one of Thomas's limp arms against the back and began wrapping tape around his appendage and the gap between the strips of wood backing. I ripped the pieces of tape off with my bare hands. His feet were easier.

I stood back to admire my handiwork.

"What about the hood?"

"Leave it on."

Dante checked Thomas's wrists. "Not bad, Sky."

"Now what?"

The fire sparked behind Dante casting an eerie glow all around him.

His eyes were on Thomas.

"Now we wait for the sedative to wear off."

The cabin felt a hundred degrees hotter once the fire got going. I welcomed the warmth when I ran back inside after freezing my ass off in the outhouse.

I nodded at Thomas. "Still out?"

Before Dante could answer a murmur came from under the black hood.

Dante yanked it off. The fire wasn't the only presence in the cabin that had come to life. Far from appearing fearful, Thomas oozed with pent-up rage.

"You two!" Thomas sputtered. "You killed Patrick and Ivo, didn't you?"

"I'll ask the questions, son," Dante said. "Now tell me who offed Janine."

Thomas looked away.

"Wendy, knife."

I grabbed Dante's hunting knife off the table and handed it to him as though he was a surgeon asking for his scalpel, and I was the assisting nurse.

"What are you going to do?" Thomas demanded.

Dante ignored him and turned to me. "Let's drain him."

That got Thomas's attention. The boy wriggled in an attempt to thrash out of his bindings.

I nodded, trying my best to seem like I thought it was a good idea. "His friends won't have any more use for him once he has no more blood."

"You can't do that!" he shouted.

"It's my job," Dante said smoothly. "You're a threat to the nation, Thomas. Unless you tell me everything, we'll consider you in league with the hostiles."

Thomas's jaw dropped. "Hostiles?"

"Hostiles, vampires, murderers…they're all the same—a danger to society. Now who killed Janine?"

Thomas pressed his lips together and shook his head.

Dante moved in on him. He showed teeth when he grinned. "I was hoping you wouldn't cooperate."

Dante sliced his dagger across Thomas's arm. The boy screamed. I looked away.

"Let's just get right to the other arm, shall we? Unless you want to tell me who killed Janine."

Dante pressed the tip of his knife into Thomas's right arm.

"Stop! Renard—it was Renard! God, just stop!"

Dante got up abruptly and went to the kitchen. He wiped his blade clean with a rag before setting it on the table. He stepped directly in front of Thomas again.

"Now for the real question. How did Renard find out?" Dante reached forward in an instant and wrapped his hands around Thomas's neck.

Thomas began making a chocking sound.

Was it wrong that I felt attracted to Dante for one fleeting second?

"This one's a freebie," Dante hissed into Thomas's ear. "I'll answer for you. *You* ratted Janine out. *You* got her killed."

Dante released his grip, and Thomas gasped as he sucked in air.

Thomas started shaking. "I didn't want her to die! She's the one who got herself involved in all this. Where do you think Renard came looking once he heard the police suspected arson at Ivo's place? He knows I'm over there all the time."

"You could have told him you didn't know anything rather than send a mass murderer after Janine."

Thomas stiffened. He looked past Dante and glared at me. "You're the

murderers. *Wendy* especially. She was the last one there that night."

"What did you tell Renard about us?"

"Everything I could!" Thomas seethed in his chair.

"Wendy," Dante said calmly, turning to me. "Take Tommy and wait in the Jeep."

I hesitated at the door.

"Go!" Dante yelled.

I jumped in place.

"Tommy," I called softly. "Tommy, let's go."

Once we were outside, I hurried Tommy into the car. He jumped in back. I climbed in after the retriever and wrapped my arms around him, burying my face into his fur.

I heard the Jeep door open and close not long after. Dante didn't say a word as he shifted gears and drove away from the cabin. The turns he took were gentle. He drove slow. I lost track of the time, but he eventually pulled to the side of the road. When he didn't get out or continue driving, I pulled my head away from Tommy.

We were on the edge of town. Dante looked from me to the passenger's seat. I took the hint, scooted over to the door, climbed down, and joined him up front. He continued driving only when I'd fastened my seatbelt.

"You killed him, didn't you?" I asked once we were on the highway.

"Renard's not the only vampire Thomas could sic on us. He was a threat, and he had to be eliminated."

I looked out the front window. "Will I ever have to kill a human?"

"No. We're vampire hunters, Sky. They've got cleaners for vermin like Thomas. I've got a call into them now—although they'll be disposing of a cold one this time. He killed Janine. It was for me to finish."

I nodded slowly. "I can't believe they got her."

"There's one thing left to do—find Renard and take him out."

Right, take him out before he took us out.

"Do you think he's looking for us?"

"Probably. The agents had someone check out his last known address. It's been cleared out."

"Will he be able to find us?"

"Doubtful. All Renard has is a couple of fake names and a city…should have said we'd come from Barrow now that I think about it. Send that fucker right up to the Big Freeze. Well, live and learn." Dante turned to me and smiled. "At least this way, he's coming to us. I've had it with Fairbanks for the time being."

"I've had it with Fairbanks forever," I countered.

"Let's talk about something else—like breakups."

I grumbled. "You're a load of laughs, you know."

"You know it's on your mind."

"Doesn't mean I want to talk about it."

"Sure you do. You're a girl."

I turned in my seat. "Hey! Watch it, buddy."

Dante chuckled. "So, what makes you think this guy is going to let you go so easily?"

I'd had the same concern—and, to be honest, hope. But I reminded myself what would happen to Fane if Valerie alerted the agents. I'd seen what happened to Thomas…part of what happened, anyway, and I knew what hunters did to vampires—I had personal experience in that department. Regardless of Valerie, it was only a matter of time before Fane tried to bite me. I kept coming to the same conclusion. One way or another, this had to end.

"I sort of told him I was seeing someone else."

"Good call, Sky—surest way to inflict the deepest wound."

"I didn't want to inflict pain. I just needed him to believe it was over. I told him I was seeing you."

"Me?" Dante's voice lifted. "Sky, I'm honored."

"I didn't think you'd mind being my pretend boyfriend."

"*Au contraire*. We don't even have to pretend."

I laughed and glanced at Dante, but my smile fell. We were on a straight stretch of highway and his palms were flat, barely touching the steering wheel.

"You're joking, right?" I asked.

"Why? I find you attractive. You think I'm funny. And we have the blood link and whole saving the world from vampires thing in common. It's tricky dating normal girls. They're not really up on the up, you know what I mean?"

I sat back in my chair. "Thanks, but I don't think so."

"Don't want to mix business with pleasure. I get it."

"I don't want to mix anything."

"Maybe not now, Sky, but we'll see. I'm irresistible, you know?"

I laughed. "You're irritating is what you are."

"And yet you can't keep away."

"I don't have a choice." I was forced to stay away from one boy and stick beside another. At least Dante wasn't bad to look at, and he did have a knack for pulling me out of funks.

We arrived in Anchorage at midnight. Dante rolled into the driveway in front of the door and pulled up the emergency brake.

"You were amazing back there, Sky."

I looked over at him and nearly laughed. I hadn't done anything but watch.

He grinned. "I'm really impressed. You're new to this, and yet you've managed to take out two nasties—on your own—and keep a cool head. You're doing great."

I smiled slowly. "Thanks. I guess it's nice to be good at something, even if it is killing vampires."

Dante smiled back at me. “Get some rest. You deserve it.”

“Nothing like aiding in a kidnapping and murder to get one started on a good night’s sleep.” I looked back at Tommy, who was sprawled out over the entire back bench snoozing. “Not a problem for Tommy, anyway.”

Dante chuckled. “Good night, Sky.”

“’Night.”

As soon as I stepped out of the Jeep, Dante pulled away and barreled down the road. This was one girl he didn’t have to worry about seeing to the door…though he could have waited to make sure I reached it. The air felt balmy compared to Fairbanks, but an instant shiver ran down my spine. I glanced at the forest at the top of the hill.

I didn’t see anyone, but I felt like I was being watched. Not that I’d see Fane if he were lurking among the trees. It was pitch-black, and he could blend into the night in his dark attire.

I stared straight into the black void for several beats to show I wasn’t scared despite my hammering heart. I turned and forced myself to walk—not run—to the front door. Once inside, I turned the bolt behind me and shut off the front porch light. It was dark inside the house.

I made my way around the house, checking all the doors and windows to make sure they were locked without turning on any lights as I made the rounds. My eyes adjusted to the dark, and I could see the stairs outlined in the gloom. I peeked inside my mother’s room and heard her snoring lightly.

I continued to my own room. In the dark, I closed my curtains and spent the rest of the evening sitting on my bed, knife beside me. It could be Fane out there. It could be Renard. Then again, it could be nothing.

I slept through most of Sunday and stayed up all the next night. Monday morning, I told my mom I must have caught a cold in Fairbanks and needed to stay home. She left me alone for the most part to rest in my room. Honestly, I didn’t know if I could get sick. The vampire blood in me probably made me immune, but I couldn’t go to school. I couldn’t face Fane.

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23
Transfer

The sudden ringing on my nightstand jolted me awake at two forty-five in the afternoon.

I sat straight up in bed, heart running amuck. I hesitated, but grabbed my cell phone. My breathing returned to normal when I saw it wasn't Fane calling.

I held the phone to my ear. "Hey Whitney."

"What the heck is going on?" Whitney demanded. "Suddenly Noel transfers to West and Valerie's back together with Fane…has the world gone mad?"

"Fane's with Valerie again?" I know I broke up with him, but how could he go back to the vamp tramp so quickly? I thought Fane liked me. I had even believed he loved me. Fool. Love was a joke.

Whitney sounded confused. "Did you guys break up or something?"

I swung my legs out of bed and stood. "When you say together, did you just see them together or were they…"

"Making out." Whitney didn't say it with nearly enough disgust.

"I'll call you later," I said abruptly and snapped my phone shut.

When I slammed it down, I aimed for the bed so it wouldn't break. I threw open my closet doors and began rummaging around for something to wear, selecting a pair of dressy jeans and black V-neck. I grabbed my phone and dialed Noel.

"Hi, Noel. How was your first day at West?"

"Sucked." She laughed a second later. "Sorry, bad word choice."

"Want to grab a coffee? Or herbal tea, if you prefer."

That got another laugh out of Noel. "Yeah, I really do. I'll pick you up."

"I'll be here."

Stranded. At least I had no shortage of new friends with cars.

I brushed out my hair and worked it into a long braid before going downstairs.

I found Mom in the kitchen.

"Noel's picking me up," I said.

Startled, she looked up from the page of a magazine she was reading slouched over the kitchen counter with a soda at her side.

"What about your cold?"

"I feel better now."

"I don't think you should be going out when you haven't been feeling well."

"Mom, this is really important."

"What's so important that it can't wait until you're better?"

"Noel just transferred to West, and I'm going to transfer tomorrow. I want to ask her some questions."

Mom straightened in her chair. "Transfer!"

Maybe I should've had this talk with my mom yesterday, but I was asleep all day.

"But…but…it's your last semester," she said. "Why do you have to transfer?"

"Fane, Mom. I can't go to the same school as him. I don't want to see him ever again." Not exactly. It would just *kill* me to see him with Valerie.

Mom considered this and relented somewhat, but not entirely. "But all your friends are at Denali and the semester's already started. You'll have to catch up in all your classes."

"I know it's a surprise, but I need a fresh start. I know I can do better if I get away from the distractions plaguing me at Denali."

Her expression softened.

I smiled and pulled my trump card. "Besides, Dante and I had a long discussion about it on the way to Fairbanks. He believes it's just what I need to get my life back on track."

"Oh," Mom said. "I'm sure Dante's right. He has a good head on his shoulders."

I gave Mom a quick kiss on the cheek. "I'll be home soon—need to get ready for my first day in a new school. Will you drive me?"

"Of course, I will."

"I still have to figure out how I'm going to get to and from West."

"I can drive you as long as you need—the whole semester if you need me to."

"Thanks, Mom."

I grabbed my coat from the closet and headed outside to wait for Noel.

I started walking down the hill. Halfway down, Noel's old Volvo chugged up beside me. She stopped, and I got in just before the tires spun in place. Noel backed up slowly into an empty driveway then pulled forward, pointing the Volvo back down the hill.

I watched Noel drive for a moment. She looked so short behind the wheel.

After a few moments of silence, I shook my head. "So you're an informant. I had no idea."

"Don't feel bad. It's not your job to know who informants are."

"Did you suspect I was an assassin at any point?"

"I had my suspicions…especially after you pulled out that dagger."

I fought back a grin and ended up losing. Noel laughed.

I asked my next question. "So that whole song and dance about Henry the mega suave biter was a lie?"

"Not exactly. I sort of stole that story from Whitney and added my own embellishments, but Henry really did bite me. He just wasn't my first."

I swallowed. “What was your first bite like?”

“It nearly killed me.” Noel watched the road as she talked. “It turns out my transfusion didn’t take. When the vampire got his teeth into me, he kept drinking. He wouldn’t stop. I lost consciousness. I didn’t wake up again until I was back on the cutting table. The agents had to patch me up and give me a second blood transfusion.”

“Assholes,” I muttered.

“They didn’t know,” Noel said quickly. “They rescued me—twice. Agent Melcher was there both times looking out for me when anyone else would have let me die without a second thought.”

“What about your parents?”

“We don’t talk,” Noel answered abruptly.

She slowed as she entered a sharp turn.

I stared out the window at the bare limbed trees.

Noel took a deep breath. “I should have died at the end of sophomore year. You and I are their newest recruits, you know.”

I turned in my seat toward her. “We are?”

“You even killed my vampire for me—the rabies vampire. He was the one who nearly drained me.”

I shuddered. “So you had your own experience with the lunatic.”

“He was almost the end of me.”

“Then I don’t feel so bad about staking him.”

“You should never feel bad about killing a vampire. They’re evil…well, most are. Not all. Marcus isn’t evil. Nor is Henry or Gavin. Or Fane.”

I sat up. “You aren’t required to report every vampire you find out to the agents, are you?”

Noel looked over. “They only care about the violent ones, or so I assume. It wouldn’t help the cause to destroy the ones that get us closer to the real dangerous targets.”

I relaxed. Only slightly. I wasn’t entirely convinced that Melcher and Crist didn’t wish to obliterate all varieties.

“Are you disappointed?” I asked. “I mean that you’re an informant and not a hunter.”

Noel’s voice lifted. “I love being an informant. I love doing my part to make the world safer. A lot of vampires, it goes to their head. You know, immortality. They don’t play by society’s rules anymore. We’re like the vampire police recruited to keep order in the world.”

“Hmm.”

“And I did have one advantage,” Noel said. “I already knew about vampires before I was recruited. This chick I met had just let me in on the whole secret and wanted me to go with her to a party so we could get bitten together.”

“But you didn’t?”

“Not that time. I chickened out. It comes as a shock the first time you see

it. Anyway, I didn't get another chance to try before…before…you know, I was recruited."

"You mean before you went into critical condition?"

Noel was quiet.

"How did it happen?"

She slouched further down in the driver's seat. "Trust me. It's not something you want to know about."

"But I do."

Noel remained quiet.

"I mean, unless you don't want me to." Which, judging from her continued silence, must have been the case. It was odd. I didn't recall hearing anything about a sophomore nearly dying the year before, whereas my accident was the talk of the school.

It was easy enough to change the subject.

I leaned over. "Did Melcher tell you that an informant was killed in Fairbanks?"

Noel's mouth hung open a moment. "No. Did a vampire get them?"

"Yeah, and now he's looking for me and Dante."

Noel stepped on the brake a bit roughly at the next stoplight. "What happened?"

"We did a job in Fairbanks recently, and someone at the party mentioned us to the dead vampire's friend."

"What's his name?"

"Renard. Supposedly he's headed this way. Maybe he's already here."

"Should you be going out?"

I gave a half shrug. "It's not like he knows my name or anything."

"I'll keep my eyes and ears open."

"Thanks."

I stared out the window.

Noel cleared her throat. "Sorry you had to break up with Fane."

"It's for the best," I said halfheartedly. "Although I'm still trying to figure out why Valerie gets to be with him."

"And go to Denali."

"Valerie's a bitch."

"You don't need to tell me twice."

"You know we'll be school mates again soon?"

Noel jolted up in her seat. "We will?"

"Tomorrow, I'm enrolling at West High."

"You are? That's great. Why? I mean, I'm so happy, but why are you transferring? This is your senior year."

"I can't go to Denali anymore. Not with Valerie moving in on Fane. I'd end up doing something stupid like attacking her in the halls. Anyway, my old friends have dropped me."

Noel considered this and nodded slowly. "I guess it's time we both

started fresh."

"Does it take you long to drive to school?"

"I'm rooming with a couple girls near school. They're early twenties, work most evenings. They leave me alone."

"Are your parents not in Anchorage?"

"They are."

"Did you turn into a wild child after the transfusion?" I asked.

"Something like that."

Noel's voice was barely above a whisper. I had to strain to hear her.

I nodded. "I had a similar experience, only in my case, it was a parent who left the house—my father."

Noel perked up. "Really?"

"Yep. He's still MIA."

"Maybe it's selfish of me, but I'm really glad you'll be going to West," Noel said.

"Thanks." I shrugged. "School's school, I guess."

"And now it'll be easier to spend time with Marcus."

"Who is this Marcus you keep mentioning, anyway?"

Noel grinned. "A vampire. A really hot one. He's not dangerous or anything."

"Has he ever bitten you before?"

"I wish. Anyway, you just have to meet him and see for yourself."

I wasn't particularly in the mood to meet any more irresistibly hot vampires. Pit me against the nasties. That dynamic was cut and dry. Literally. At least those ones didn't rip out your heart.

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24
Champagne And Blood

It was a surreal sensation, walking through the halls of a new school. I remembered what a nerve-wracking change high school seemed like during the first days of freshman year. Now it was not so much a big step as new territory.

I managed to get into a fifth period film elective with Noel so at least I'd see one familiar face during my day.

Mom invited Dante over for dinner after my first day at West. He brought over a bottle of sparkling apple cider, which my mom drank instead of soda. She hummed as she filled three champagne flutes and handed them out.

"So your classes are all right and the students seem cool?" Dante asked.

"Roger that, Dante."

Dante smacked his fist on the table. "That's the spirit!"

"Yeah, yeah, but enough about me," I said. "How's your semester going at the ol' U of A?"

"I have a good mix of easy and difficult classes. Need to allow time for the extracurricular activities." Dante winked.

Mom giggled as though we were all in on the joke. "Do you get called to duty very often?" she asked.

"Not that much, though this is turning into a busy year. The agents are sending me to Kotzebue this weekend."

"What's happening in Kotzebue?" I asked.

"There's a rabid vampire terrorizing the village."

"Do you need my help?"

"Much as I'd like it, this mission's simple. Anyway, it's your first week at a new school."

"I wouldn't mind," I said. "It's not like I get to travel anywhere else. Might as well get a glimpse of the back country."

"I wouldn't worry about that too much."

I shrugged. "Well, best of luck saving the town of Kotzebue. Don't forget to pack your mukluks."

"Right, I'll bring you back some seal meat."

I smacked Dante's shoulder, and he smacked me back. Mom grinned. I hadn't seen her this happy in too long.

Parts of me felt content. Other parts felt broken. The most important lesson I'd learned over the past couple months was to be strong. Sometimes, that meant laughing with company even with a heart split in two.

"Pssst," Noel said the next day in film class.

I raised a brow. She was seated beside me, and class hadn't started yet, so there was still a lot of noise as students walked in and settled into their seats. She must've been in a good mood because she wasn't all hooded as she tended to be when she was acting moody.

"Marcus is having a party Saturday night. He mentioned there are a couple vamps in town from Fairbanks who might show."

My heart began thumping.

"No one by the name you mentioned, but maybe I can find out something from these other two—Greg and James."

I tapped my pen over my notebook. "It's worth a shot."

I'd finally get a chance to meet Marcus.

Maybe Fane would show up.

Scratch that. That wasn't the reason I lied to my mom on Saturday afternoon about sleeping over at Noel's so we could stay up late working on a film project.

It would have been so much easier if I had been teaming up with Dante. Mom would have handed us party hats and said, "Have a good time. Stay out as late as you want."

I didn't have time for my mom's hang ups. I had responsibilities. Besides, maybe with a bit of sleuthing, Noel and I could figure out where Renard was holed up. That would show the agents just how valuable we newbies could be.

I don't know what Marcus did for money, but bank robbery wasn't out of the question. He had a tall two-story townhouse overlooking the inlet, and everything from the floor to the furniture to the décor to the lighting was magnificent.

Noel and I entered through a massive hand-carved wooden door with a panel of etched glass on each side and walked in over large slabs of sand-colored stone. I felt like Dorothy walking down the yellow brick road.

"Is this like the VIP Vamp party," I whispered to Noel. "You didn't prepare me for this."

Noel smiled. "How could I?"

There was a large open layout from the entrance to a kitchen that looked down into a massive living room several steps down. Artwork hung from the walls, and statues sat on pieces of furniture that were just as beautiful and unique as the objects they supported.

"Joyeux, Noel! There you are."

A man in a black and white floral silk shirt and white pants walked over and kissed Noel on each cheek. His hair was luscious. It flipped off his forehead and tapered off under his ears.

"Hello, Marcus."

He looked me over. "And who is this?"

"I'm a new student at West," I stammered. "But not…new. You know?"

"What is your name?"

"Aurora."

Marcus's eyes lit up. "Noel and Aurora. I like this. My dark haired duet." He reached out and took some of my hair in his hand.

I glanced sideways at Noel.

"Nice, very nice, but I do not like this scarf. You must not hide your neck. There is nothing as beautiful as…the neck."

I stared transfixed into Marcus's pale blue eyes as he spoke.

He turned back to Noel. "It is good you brought her here. Now make sure she has a good time."

"Yes, Marcus."

Once he'd moved away and I was able to breathe again, Noel took my arm. She led me to the kitchen. The cabinets were made of solid oak with custom iron handles. No two were the same. All of the appliances were stainless steel surrounded by granite countertops. Champagne flowed from a small silver fountain on the counter.

This was more like it.

I'd take the high-class assignments over boarded-up shacks in rundown neighborhoods any day. I couldn't imagine anyone foul enough to be friends with Ivo turning up to this grand affair. Guess I'd just have to enjoy myself and see if I could pick up any information.

"Champagne?" Noel asked, looking at the empty glasses on a silver tray beside the fountain.

"I don't know. My last experience with champagne was a bit rough. Then again, I did drink an entire bottle in one sitting."

A lean young man with tight abs and thick dark hair walked into the kitchen. Noel's eyes lit up when she saw him. "Henry!"

So this was Henry. He embraced Noel.

"Henry, I want you to meet my friend, Aurora Sky."

Henry turned to me with a devilish smile and extended his free hand to not exactly shake, but grasp, mine for several beats. "Any friend of Noel's is a friend of mine. Welcome, Aurora."

"Thanks."

"Aurora just transferred to West as well," Noel added.

"Wonderful, then my girl here is in good company." Henry broke away from Noel to grab two champagne glasses. "May I?" he asked, filling each glass in the fountain.

"Thank you," I said after he handed me a glass.

"What's this, Henry? Trying to keep all the beautiful ladies to yourself?" An equally dashing boy strolled into the kitchen. His hair was light brown and streaked with gold highlights.

I was beginning to understand how Whitney and Hope could willingly allow themselves to be bitten.

Henry grinned. "Gavin, meet Noel's friend, Aurora Sky. She's new at West."

"A pleasure," Gavin said, eyes sparkling like the champagne in my glass. "We are very happy to have you at our school."

"How about we give Aurora a tour of the palace?" Henry suggested.

"Good idea." Gavin held his arm out for me.

I took it. Might as well get a lay of the land. Henry did the same for Noel. So they were ridiculously charming. Big deal. They'd had centuries to practice.

Henry led us across the stone steps that connected the door to the kitchen and living room. "These stones were imported from Jerusalem."

I looked down. "You're kidding."

Henry grinned. "Come see the upstairs."

The upstairs to Marcus's palace was accessed via a spiral staircase with wood steps. Its iron railing curled and twisted like meticulously planned doodles from the posts to the steps. I pulled my arm out of Gavin's to walk up single file.

There was a view of the living room from the balcony at the top of the stairs. Henry led us into a guest room with a bed high off the ground, the mattress level with a large window. "Marcus believes that if one has an ocean view, he should be able to see it from his bed."

"Makes sense," I muttered, staring around the room in awe.

The space was covered in art and curiosities on all sides. You'd think it would look cluttered, but the effect was fascinating. Statues sat on the floor beside upholstered armchairs and chaise lounges. There was a large turtle, his back made out of green tiles, and a three-foot statue of a faun like the one in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* standing beside a stained glass lamp. A hand-carved wooden lion sat at the head of the bed looking into the room.

I no longer felt like Dorothy. Now, I was Lucy stepping through the wardrobe into Narnia.

"Wait until you see the shower," Noel said. "It has its own room."

I just laughed.

Henry led us to a glass wall enclosing a walk-in shower with a rainforest mural inside done entirely in tile. The shower could easily fit ten people.

My eyes were bugging out of my head. "Wow."

"Yeah," Noel said.

"Want to see the rest of the rooms?" Henry asked.

I nodded.

The next door we came across was shut with a silver bat dangling from

the doorknob.

"That means do not disturb," Gavin said. "There's one for each guest room should you ever need it."

My cheeks heated instantly. I looked away.

Henry swooped in and took my arm. "Come on, there are plenty more rooms to see. This place is like an after-hours museum. Lucky for us, Marcus is fond of company. You'll find the gates to the palace are almost always open."

I glanced at the artwork on the walls as Henry escorted me into another guest room. This one was painted and decorated in various shades of orange. There was a hand-sewn bat pillow propped on a low seat, his flat felt wings spread over the chair. He looked straight ahead with orange glass eyes.

"This is the October room," Henry said.

I craned my head around the room. I had to ask. "How did Marcus get to be so rich? Don't tell me he's been saving for several centuries?"

Henry laughed. "No, nothing as mundane as that. All this is paid for by his benefactor, Richard Nielsen, of Nielsen's Fine Art Gallery."

I should have been revolted. Instead I smiled and nearly laughed. "You mean Marcus is a kept vampire?"

Henry chuckled. "Marcus enjoys the good life."

"And his lover is human, correct?"

"That's right."

"He doesn't care that Marcus is a vampire?"

"He cares a lot. It's an added bonus, in fact."

I screwed up my face. "So he likes all the bloodsucking and biting?"

Henry looked me over carefully. "A lot more than you, apparently." He took my arm and led me back to the door. "What Richard really likes is a man who won't age and a man who can't get sick."

I looked away. "Oh."

"We'll be down in a moment," Gavin said as Henry and I started out of the October room.

I glanced back. Noel was conveniently inspecting figurines on a Creamsicle-colored shelf.

"Don't worry," Henry said. "I'll show Aurora the way back." He turned to me and smiled. "It looks like you could use a refill."

I glanced at my half-empty champagne glass. I hadn't drunk that much. How could I with my mouth hanging open in awe of the place?

"Sure," I said.

When I looked back over my shoulder, the silver bat hung from the doorknob of the October room.

"You are curious," Henry said to me smoothly. "And yet cautious. I'll be honest. It makes me want to bite you even more. You should not be here until you are ready." He whispered inside my ear. "The others aren't as considerate as I am."

Shivers ran down my spine.

Henry released my arm at the foot of the spiral staircase. “Enjoy the party, Aurora Sky.”

Part of me wished Henry would escort me downstairs. Why did vampire boys have to be so much cooler than normal boys like stupid Scott Stevens?

Dante had said the first bite was better than sex. Maybe it was vampire sex that was better.

On that thought, my cheeks heated. I looked over my shoulder in time to catch Henry slipping inside the October room.

Why was it I wished I could trade places with Noel right then? Maybe it had something to do with the two hotties who would soon be sinking their teeth simultaneously into her neck.

I shook my head violently to clear the visual.

Fine, back down to the party I went. I was just the assassin here. I didn’t get to engage in love bites with devastatingly hot vampires. Nope, I got the meanie, nasty, psychotic sickos who ripped through my flesh like rabid wolves and bled all over my clothes.

Remind me what the perks of my job are again?

By the time I’d made it down to the first floor, I’d emptied my champagne glass. I took it inside the kitchen and held it under one of the spouts spurting bubbly.

“Hi there,” a woman with platinum blond hair said. “I haven’t seen you before. I’m Rachel.”

“Hey. My name’s Aurora.”

The woman smiled. “Well, Aurora, it’s nice of you to join us.”

People certainly knew how to mingle here.

“Let me know if anyone bothers you.”

“Um, thanks.” Was this woman a vampire? I didn’t see any bite marks on her neck. Vampires really ought to stick out more.

“Don’t mention it.” Rachel smiled and walked out of the kitchen.

I followed her out and leaned against a wall overlooking the living room. Now me, I wasn’t a mingler. I was more of the type to stand nervously in the corner thinking about how I didn’t know anyone.

“Hi there.” A man in his late twenties joined my side. Like all the other males partying at the palace, he wasn’t bad to look at. “Are you friends with Marcus?”

“We just met.”

“Same here. I’m William, by the way.”

“Aurora.”

“That’s a pretty name.” He smiled and tilted his head toward the living room. “My girlfriend goes way back with Marcus…centuries back.”

I turned and looked at him closer. “Your girlfriend’s a vampire?” Was it Rachel? How many inter-species couples were there at this thing? Maybe dating Fane wasn’t such a big whoop after all—apparently, everyone was

doing it. I scanned the women in the crowd. “I haven’t met any lady vamps.”

William chuckled. “No, you don’t come across too many fanged females. Quite the pity.”

“How long have you been together?”

“About a year.”

“And you’re not worried about what will happen when you get older and she doesn’t?”

William smirked. “How old are you?”

“Eighteen.”

“Shouldn’t someone your age be living in the now rather than worrying about the future?”

“It’s never too soon to think about the future.”

“Life’s short. It could end at any moment.”

I glanced into the living room. My eyes rested on Marcus. “Or it could go on and on.”

William followed the direction of my eyes. “For the chosen. As for the rest, what does it matter when they die?”

I shrugged. Sounded sort of dark.

“Would you like to meet your first lady vampire?”

“Sure.”

“She’s outside having a smoke. Do you smoke, Aurora?”

“No.”

“Ah, of course not, you’ve got your future to think about.”

I guessed it wasn’t Rachel, then, because she was standing beside a telescope at the window with another blond woman.

“Do you have a coat?” William asked.

I shook my head. “I left it in the car.”

“Then we won’t stay outside long.”

William hurried me along the front path. “She’s smoking by the street,” he said. “House rules.”

I rubbed my arms. At least I was wearing a long-sleeved shirt. “You know, maybe I should meet her when she comes back inside. That’s the trouble with being human,” I attempted to joke. “We’re susceptible to the cold.”

“She’s right up here,” William said. “Hey, Wendy,” he called. “Where are you?”

The name set an alarm off in my head. Before I had a chance to panic, William turned and looked directly at me. “There you are.”

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25
Catch And Release

Stupid, stupid, stupid. How could I be so stupid? Sure, let's follow the stranger outside to the secluded street. And seriously? Who really wanted to meet a female vampire when there were so many hotties posturing like statues inside the palace—that place where there were actual people to shout out to for help?

A rusted Buick idled on the road. Two doors opened up front and a couple of scuzzbuckets stepped out.

"This her?" one asked.

William nodded. "We've found ourselves an assassin, boys."

I turned to run, but William grabbed me by the hair and yanked back. My entire head felt like it'd been whacked against a wall. Tears leaked out the sides of my eyes. I kneed him in the groin. Did that work on vampires? Thankfully yes. He grunted and let go of my hair.

One of William's henchmen wrapped his arms around me from behind. I stomped on his foot. He shouted. The third one smacked me across the face so hard I fell back and landed on the ground.

Two of them grabbed me and dragged me to the car while a third opened the back door. I was shoved inside. A scuzz got on either side of me. William jumped into the driver's seat.

I looked from side to side. "So which one of you is Renard?"

William laughed from up front. "I'm Renard."

"Of course you are," I said bitterly.

"You're not the only one who can come up with a phony name, *Wendy*."

"How did you know who I was?"

"Your friend Janine was very forthcoming…once I broke both her arms."

I tightened my hands into fists. "You're disgusting!"

"*I'm* disgusting?" Renard asked. "What do you call what you did to Ivo and Patrick?"

"Justice."

"Hmm. Justice. And that is what's coming to you, Aurora Sky."

If I weren't so focused on my impending death, I would have told him to bring it. Death was one thing. It could come swiftly; I knew from experience. A drawn-out torturous death was another matter altogether.

If I weren't squeezed in so tight between the two thugs, I might be able to reach under my jeans for my knife.

"You know, I think I left my purse at the party, so if I could just pop back in and retrieve it then meet you fellows back here."

"Funny," Renard said. "Thomas told me the boy was the funny one. When is Dante showing up?"

"He's not."

The vampire to my left grabbed me by the throat. I choked as his hands squeezed.

Renard looked in the rearview mirror. "Wait until we get her to the shack. *Then* we'll see to it she starts talking."

Shack? No! I'd rather die at the palace than inside a shack. Hell, I'd rather die behind the wheel of a car.

Renard drove down Minnesota Boulevard. There weren't many vehicles out, but a few. I looked over at a group of high school boys cruising beside us. Couldn't they see a kidnapping was in progress? They looked over briefly then sped ahead of us.

Unlike Thomas, I wasn't hooded. There was no need to hood me. Why had Dante covered Thomas's eyes to begin with? He probably hadn't made the decision to off him at that point. Unlike my situation. No mystery there. I'd be tortured, interrogated, and killed. At least the blood suckers wouldn't get a drop out of me.

The shack turned out to be a foreclosed house in a dark neighborhood. A realty sign was posted in the front lawn. The garage door had been left open. Renard pulled in. James got out and pulled me with him. The other vampire quickly joined us and grabbed my other arm.

Renard led us into the house through a connecting door inside the garage. It was cold and empty inside. Renard turned an overhead light on inside the hardwood living room and stepped in the center.

Switch plates were missing from the outlets. Beyond Renard's shoulder, I could see into a kitchen. It was missing all its appliances, as though the previous owners took everything they could with them besides the actual house.

"So this is a vampire hunter," Renard said, looking me over as he paced.

"She just looks like a girl," the vamp on my right said.

"She is just a girl."

I glared at him.

"A girl with very bad blood."

Renard stopped in front of me. "You think my kind shouldn't walk the earth, but the way I see it, you're the atrocity. We've been around for centuries. How long have you genetically altered freaks been around? Couple decades? You were created in a lab. We," he said, stretching out his arms, "are the chosen ones selected by nature to live for all eternity."

Renard smacked a fist into his hand. "Now, when is your freak friend going to show up at Marcus's party?"

"I told you, he's not."

Renard glanced at his cohorts. "Aurora, you've probably been wondering exactly what happened to Janine. We'll show you…starting with your arms."

Renard's goons closed in on me before I could reach for the dagger. They each took an arm in a bone crushing twist.

"Wait!" I shouted.

I needed to stall. I needed my arms back so I could grab my knife.

"Yes?" Renard said.

"I—I don't know exactly when he's coming. He likes to make a late appearance."

Luckily, Dante was safe in Kotzebue with his run-of-the-mill rabid vampire. Kind of missed those kind right now.

"What's the plan, Renard?" James asked.

"Greg and I will head back to the party to get the boy. You'll stay here and guard her until we return."

"And what should I do with her while I wait? Break every bone in her body?" James's grip tightened on my arm.

"No, I have a better idea. Bring her here, boys."

They each gripped an arm and dragged me over to Renard.

"If her blood is toxic to us perhaps our blood is poisonous to her."

We have the same blood, you fool! I felt like spitting the words at him, but that was classified. Renard looked more intent on brutality than information. At least that much was going for me. He didn't want to interrogate me —just rough me up. Lucky me.

Renard pulled out a knife.

Damn, that was my move.

Renard stepped toward me. "Then again, we could just slit her throat."

The eyes of his cronies lit up like ghoulish orbs in their sockets.

"Do it, Renard!" James yelled. "Gut her like a harpy."

I thrashed under their grip until I saw the flash of the knife's blade just under my eyes. My body seized up in terror.

"You'll have to excuse my associates. They have no imagination." Renard sliced open his wrist in one swift movement, grabbed me by the back of the head, and thrust his bleeding arm inside my mouth.

My instinct was to bite him in self-defense. I did so without thinking. When I bit down, I heard him laugh and, too late, felt the first gush of blood spurt inside my mouth. I gagged in an effort not to swallow, but the blood was already trickling down my throat.

Renard retracted his wrist and opened his mouth over mine. He covered my lips in a wet, grotesque kiss before pushing me backward. The room turned over as I fell. I couldn't move to brace myself. I was locked up, as unbending as a pine tree crashing to the ground.

My tailbone connected with the hardwood. Pain shot through my pelvis. My heart burst into a rapid succession of pattering, as though trying to punch its way out of my chest. I opened my mouth to gasp, but nothing came out. Fear. Adrenaline. They powered my performance. It needed to be convincing.

Every part of me shook: my arms, my legs, my hands, my feet.

No one said anything for several minutes.

When the shaking showed no sign of subsiding, James turned to Renard

and asked, “Can we kill her now?”

“No.” Renard never took his eyes off me. “We leave her like this.”

“Squirming on the floor?”

Renard’s eyes widened like a sinister grin over his face. “Suffering. We’ll give the boy a preview of what’s in store for him—a little taste of their own medicine.”

I made sure to keep my body in a fit of motion. My tailbone throbbed from when I’d landed against the floor. Moving around didn’t help any.

Renard watched, rapt, for several minutes before bending down by my side. I couldn’t see what he was up to with my head back, eyes on the ceiling.

Then I saw his hand reach over my face toward my neck. He grasped a fistful of my scarf and yanked, causing the fabric to tighten around my neck then succumb to his brute force.

Renard straightened up and held the scarf up in one hand. “Got myself a trophy, boys.” He wound it around his neck and tossed one end of the scarf over his shoulder. “What do you think?”

“I think we should drain her,” James said eagerly.

“I meant what do you think about the scarf?”

“It makes me hungry. It’s such a waste that we can’t drink her.”

“She sort of reminds me of a fish flopping around inside a boat,” Greg said.

“Maybe a splash of water would help her.” James disappeared into the kitchen and returned with a bucket of water. He dumped it over my face.

I sputtered in addition to twitching.

The vampires erupted into laughter. James looked down at my face. He moved to my side, pulled back his leg, and kicked me with all his strength.

“Don’t bother!” Renard snapped. “She can’t feel a thing right now.”

James shrugged and moved away. It was only voices again somewhere by the window.

Renard was wrong. I could feel pain. I felt pain shooting at my side like a stick of dynamite thrust through my ribcage erupting into hundreds of agonizing sparks.

“Is she still twitching?” I heard sometime later.

Greg got in my face moments later. “How long does this last?”

“She can’t speak, moron.”

Why hadn’t Renard left yet and taken one of his sidekicks with him? I had a much better chance of taking down one vampire than three. It would come down to combat this time. Suddenly I wished I’d put more effort into kickboxing class.

Renard snapped his fingers. “Time to hunt down the boy.”

“Double or nothing?” Greg said and the three vampires laughed.

“Sure you can handle the assassin?” Renard said. “She looks pretty scary shaking on the floor.”

“I think I can manage,” James said. If only he hadn’t grabbed Renard’s

knife.

Now I had to take on an assailant with a weapon.

Renard and Greg clomped out of the house. An engine revved inside the garage. Tires screeched onto the street.

The moment we were alone, James circled me with the knife as though he were a vulture preparing to swoop in at any moment and pick my bones clean.

I reached slowly down my leg, sliding my fingers under my pants and closing my fist around the hilt of the dagger.

The shaking stopped. I jumped to my feet, done playing the victim.

James's eyes widened. His surprise didn't stop him from lunging. I jumped back, but not before the tip of his blade slid into my abdomen.

I screamed.

Getting bit hurt. Stabbing was a different kind of pain. Quicker. Colder. Deadly.

I put a hand over my stomach and looked at James.

When he smiled I realized, *this is real; he's going to try and kill me*.

I could lead him in a circle around the room like I had with the rabies vampire, or I could get this over with once and for all.

I let out a battle cry and charged. My shoulder rammed James in the chest as I twisted sideways upon impact. He stumbled back several steps.

Before I could lunge in for the stab, James rushed me. I crouched at the last second. *Wham!* James tripped over me, hit the ground, and dropped his knife. I grabbed his leg with my free hand as he scrambled after the blade.

He kicked backwards landing a blow over my windpipe. I dropped my dagger.

My stomach stung. My tailbone ached. I couldn't breathe.

James snatched his knife and scrambled back. I clutched my neck with both hands until James grabbed my arm and sliced open my wrist. I didn't feel it at first. I was still trying to breathe.

James grabbed my other wrist and made his third cut.

A cry gurgled in my throat.

If only I could pull the same maneuver as Renard and thrust my wrist inside James's mouth.

It was worth a try.

I held my wrist out and rasped, "You know you want it."

James looked from my bleeding wrist to my eyes. "I might not be able to drink your blood, but I can still drain you dry."

He stabbed me in the thigh. I cried out.

I reached around frantically for my knife. My fingers grasped the hilt. Black dots floated over my vision. I dragged my body over the floor, smearing a red trail across the hardwood. The dagger scraped against the ground with every push.

I was going to die in a pool of my own blood, wasn't I?

If I died, Fane would never know why I broke up with him. I didn't care if he was a vampire. I did it to protect him.

Fane.

I called out to him in my head. Desperation made me hope for the impossible. Fane was the last person who'd be out looking for me.

James inched his way over, a sadistic smile over his face.

When I'd backed myself against the wall he crouched beside me. James touched my neck with the tip of the knife. "Is this where he bit you? Is this where Ivo took his last drink?"

His breath reeked. If I hadn't been kicked in the throat I could have breathed through my mouth rather than my nose.

James leaned forward with the knife, pushing the blade into my neck.

The scream that came from my throat, ripped my air ways back open.

James flinched at the shrill noise and dropped his knife in surprise. There was no time to think. I pitched myself forward and plunged my dagger into his chest. James's body crashed to the ground beside me.

I relaxed my hold on the dagger. My eyes fluttered shut. I slumped against the wall, listening to the sound of my own breathing.

So this was the end? I would die in a shack after all. Hopefully death claimed me before Renard returned.

The front door burst open. It was thrown so hard it crashed against the inner wall.

Noel spoke first.

"Aurora, oh my God!" She crouched by my side.

At first I thought I imagined the second voice.

"Aurora?"

My heart fluttered. Fane. I got to see him one last time after all. I tried to smile.

"She's been stabbed," Noel said.

Fane's face appeared over me. "Jesus Christ!"

He disappeared quickly. Fabric ripped through the room. Fane returned with blue strips of cloth and held one at my neck.

"Tighten these around her wounds," he instructed Noel. "If you need more, check the duffel bag on the kitchen floor."

Fane pressed the fabric tightly to the wound on my throat. "We need to get her to a hospital."

"No!" Noel cried.

Fane scowled.

"The hospital can't help her," Noel said. "I need to get her on base."

"Too far," Fane said. "I'm less than a mile away. Go buy bandages and disinfectant and meet me there: 880 Alder Circle. Here, take my wallet. Go!"

Fane looked down at me after Noel left and scooped me into his arms. I rested my head on his shoulder. The temperature outside was only slightly colder than inside the house. Fane reached for his car door handle while

holding me against him. He laid me gently on the back bench in his car.

He didn't say anything during the drive. It was as though he believed I couldn't hear. Or maybe he didn't want to talk to me. Noel must have enlisted his help out of desperation, which meant he knew what I was. If he was upset with me before, he had to downright hate me now.

"Come on," he said, urging his car along as he drove, but the tank moved at its slow, smooth pace.

I drifted out of consciousness until the car choked to a stop in Fane's driveway. Fane jumped out, came round to the back, and gathered me into his arms.

He kicked at his front door. Joss opened up and was nearly knocked over as Fane entered with me.

Joss hurried after us. "What's going on?"

"She's been cut in five places."

"What happened?"

"Vampires got her."

"What the deuce? Did they drink from her thigh as well?"

Fane laid me on the couch gently. "They didn't drink her. They found out she's a vampire hunter."

Joss's eyes doubled in size. "And you brought her here?" He stormed to Fane's side. "Francesco, she has to go."

"She's not going anywhere until I see to her wounds."

"But why?"

"Don't ask me that," Fane said somberly.

He crouched by my side, checked the wound at my neck, and reapplied pressure. His hands shook as he unzipped my jeans. Fane pulled my top up halfway. Our eyes met.

There was a knock at the door.

"Who's this now?" Joss asked.

"Come in," Fane called.

Noel hurried in with a plastic shopping sack.

"Who's this?" Joss repeated.

No one answered.

"I have gauze and Hydrogen Peroxide," Noel said.

"Good. Clean out the wounds on her stomach and thigh. I'll take care of her wrists and neck."

Noel paused to look at Fane.

His eyes narrowed. "Noel, I've got it."

They pulled the rags off. Noel swabbed at my stomach. My eyes fluttered.

Fane stopped wrapping one of my wrists and placed a hand on my cheek. "Stay with me, Aurora."

He held my gaze for several beats before returning to my wrists.

Once the blood was cleaned up, Fane wrapped my wounds in gauze.

He peeled back a large square bandage for my neck, pressing firmly as he smoothed it over my raw skin.

Noel looked me over. “Aurora, are you okay?”

“No,” Fane said. “She shouldn’t talk. Tell me who else was behind this and where I can find them.”

Noel wrung her hands. “It was a vampire going around calling himself William at Marcus’s place. He came alone, but I saw him leave with two others in a tan Buick. I called Marcus when I got the bandages, and he confirmed that they had just returned to the party. He said that the guy calling himself William is wearing the red scarf Aurora had on earlier.”

Joss huffed. “Marcus.”

Fane tensed his jaw. “Does Marcus know Aurora’s an assassin?”

“No.”

“Good. What does this William look like?”

“I believe his name’s really Renard. He came after Aurora after she…” Noel glanced from me to Fane. “Offed an acquaintance of his in Fairbanks.”

“Bloody hell,” Joss said.

Fane stood. “I’ll be back.”

Joss stepped in his way. “Don’t do this, Francesco.”

Fane glanced back at me. “As long as this guy’s breathing, Aurora’s not safe.”

Joss moved in step with Fane as he tried to sidestep him. “I won’t let you do this.”

Fane slipped around him. “Take care of her.”

I reached a hand out to stop him, but no one saw. Fane slammed the door behind him.

“Hell! Bloody hell! Bloody hell!” Joss bellowed. “He’s going to get himself bloody killed. And for what purpose? To save a bloody vampire hunter.” He turned and looked at me. “Is she truly one of those newfangled vampire hunters?”

Joss looked at Noel suddenly. “Are *you*?”

“No,” Noel said. “I’m an informant.”

“Bloody brilliant. Francesco leaves me behind with an assassin and a spy.”

Noel shrugged.

“Can’t you get her out of here?”

Noel’s forehead wrinkled. “I need to get her to one of our doctors. Could you help me move her to my car?”

“You want me to touch her?”

“Her skin can’t infect you.”

“I’m still not getting anywhere near her.”

“Come on,” Noel said, losing patience. “I need help.”

Finally I managed to sit upright. “No,” I croaked.

Noel and Joss looked at me.

“I have to help Fane.”

Noel’s face loosened up. She came to my side. “Aurora, we have to get you on base. You’ve lost a lot of blood. You may need another transfusion.”

“Oh, great,” Joss said. “Fill her up with more of your toxins.”

“No,” I said.

“Can you get up?” Noel asked.

“Blood.”

“What?”

If I shared the same blood type as vampires, wouldn’t it stand to reason that consuming human blood would rejuvenate me?

“Bring me blood.”

Noel looked at Joss as though he might be able to decipher my request. “I don’t understand.”

Joss studied my face a moment. “I believe your friend is requesting blood.”

“You mean she wants to…” Noel’s eyes widened.

Joss looked at us both darkly. “Drink blood.”

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26
Cravings

Joss turned and disappeared. He reemerged with a tall clear glass. No porcelain mug masking the contents. He handed it to me from two feet away and retracted his hand once I took it. He and Noel watched me.

Here went nothing.

I took the first sip. My brain told me to gag, but I didn't. I took a second sip and then a third. The taste was exquisite, like a thick milkshake triggering an instant boost. I guzzled down the rest. The blood coated my throat and slid down my esophagus.

I could feel it flowing through my veins, filling me with life and vitality. My heart beat out a blissful rhythm. I licked the last of it off my lips.

I stood. "Noel, take me back to Marcus's house."

"Aurora," Noel said slowly. "You just drank blood."

"Self-administered transfusion," I said.

I didn't want to think about what it meant. Not now. Not with Fane's life at stake.

I zipped my pants up. "Let's go."

Noel glanced at Joss.

"He's not coming," I said.

Noel's Volvo was parked on the street. I climbed in and stared out the windshield at the silent neighborhood. "How did you find me?"

Noel started the car. "I followed you."

"You didn't want to make a night of it in the October room?" I had no right to sound annoyed, but that's how my tone came out.

"I thought Henry was going to stay with you. When he came back to the October room I worried. It was your first vampire party. I came downstairs to check on you and saw you leaving with some guy I'd never seen before. So I followed you."

Tears gathered in my eyes.

"Thank you," I whispered.

Noel nodded.

"Aurora, I'm sorry I told Fane. I didn't know what else to do."

"You did the right thing. Does anyone else know? Henry? Marcus?"

"No, of course not. Marcus thinks Renard was stalking you."

I shuddered. "He was."

"Right, but not for the reasons Marcus thinks. Unfortunately, it happens even under normal circumstances. A vampire obsesses over a human, stalks her, kills her… that's why the agents need us."

I touched the bandage on my neck.

Noel cleared her throat. "How are you feeling?"

"Better… now."

Noel didn't mention the blood again.

"Why are you going after Fane?" she asked. "Can't he handle himself? I mean, he's a vampire."

"But he's not a killer. I am."

Noel pulled up to Marcus's townhouse slowly. She dropped her head.

"I can't go in with you, Aurora."

"I know." I started to get out and stopped. "Thanks again. For following me. If you hadn't I'd be dead."

Noel smiled. "No problem. Do you still need a place to crash tonight?"

I shook my head. "No. See you at school?"

"Yeah."

I waved as Noel drove off. I took a deep breath and headed for the door to the palace. I didn't know what I'd expected inside. Blood and mayhem, maybe. But everything was the way I'd left it before the abduction. Guests milled around the living room in cozy clusters, drinks poised in one hand.

Once I walked through the front door, Marcus came over to greet me as though it was natural that I should return bandaged at the throat.

I followed him into the empty kitchen. He took a bottle of whiskey from a cupboard and pulled out a crystal drinking glass.

"Something to dull the pain?"

"No, thank you."

Marcus poured a small amount of whiskey into the glass and tossed it back.

I ran a hand along the smooth granite countertop. "Where's Fane?"

Marcus licked his lips in one slow, languid motion before answering. "You should have told me that you were with Francesco. I'll admit, I didn't want to bite you before, but now that it is forbidden…" Marcus's grin widened.

"Where is he?"

Marcus poured another splash of whiskey into the crystal glass and pushed it toward me. "Disposing of some trash."

My breath caught. "Renard and Greg?"

Marcus screwed the top on the whiskey bottle and returned it to the cupboard. "No one abducts a guest from my home. Not without consequences."

I pushed away from the oven. "I need to help him."

"He has help."

"No, I need to take care of it."

Marcus looked me over and chuckled. "You are unusual, Aurora, but I like unusual. It's already taken care of."

"What do you mean?"

Marcus reached toward me. I flinched, but he was only grabbing the whiskey glass. He swirled it in his hand.

"I have a special room. I call it my music room. Only certain types are shown the music room. Those who misbehave. Renard and Greg got the personal tour earlier."

My mouth hung open. "You mean…? You?"

Marcus lifted the glass to his nose and inhaled. His lashes fluttered and lips puckered. "I do still enjoy a killing on occasion. When they deserve it, of course."

I willed myself not to shudder. One day, I might be asked to the music room. I supposed the only notes one produced in there was a high-pitched shriek.

"And the bodies?"

Marcus's lip curled. "A dirty task…disposal. Francesco, Henry, and Gavin are taking care of it." Marcus finished off the whiskey.

"I should go."

"Stay. They will be back shortly."

I looked at the floor then at Marcus. "I'm sorry for the trouble."

Marcus's eyes sparkled. "So polite. I like this."

He reached for my hair and let it slide across his open palm.

"Thing of beauty; heart of darkness. I see you." He stepped closer. "I see you, Aurora." His voice evened out as he moved away from me. "You should come by more often. The door is always open to you."

I waited inside the kitchen. I wasn't in the mood to sit in the living room with the crowd of revelers. Marcus killed Renard and Greg. It was a relief. They were dead. I didn't have to do it. Fane was safe.

I tapped my foot on the oak floor. The sound was drowned out by real footsteps. Relief flooded me when Henry walked in.

"Aurora? What are you doing here?"

I lit up as though witnessing the return of an old friend.

He looked at me rather peculiarly. "Noel said you were one tough cookie. I figured you'd be at the hospital or at home."

"Is Fane with you?"

"Ah." Henry smiled. "I can't believe you and Noel failed to mention you were with Francesco."

"Is he coming inside?"

"He and Gavin are parking the car."

"And the bodies?"

"We made an afterhours visit to the dump." Henry nodded at the bandage around my neck. "How are you holding up?"

"Fine, thanks to Fane and Noel…and you, Marcus, and Gavin, it turns out."

Henry chuckled. "They chose the wrong girl to mess with. How did you

know those hooligans, anyway?"

"I ran across them in Fairbanks," I lied. "Let's just say they didn't like being refused a bite."

Henry looked me up and down. "That must be awfully good blood to come all the way down from Fairbanks."

"The way I see it, they didn't have much else going on in their lives."

"Touché."

From the corner of my eye I saw Fane and Gavin passing the kitchen. Before disappearing behind the next wall Fane stopped suddenly and turned. I gripped one of my wrists in my hand. Big mistake—it disturbed the wound. I released my wrist at once.

Fane swooped into the kitchen. "What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you."

"You shouldn't be here at all. You should be resting, recovering."

I didn't like the way he lectured me in front of Henry and Gavin.

I lifted my chin. "As you can see, I'm fine."

"You're not fine. They nearly killed you."

Did Fane really think I wanted to be scolded right now? Hot tears stung my eyes. I brushed past him.

"Where are you going?"

"Home!"

Fane caught up to me on the stone entryway. "Oh really, and how are you getting there?"

"I'll walk."

Fane grabbed my arm and pulled me to him roughly. My heart beat wildly.

He grumbled. "I don't know whether to strangle you or shake the sense back into you."

"I think I've had enough strangling for one night," I retorted.

I glanced at Henry and Gavin. They stood just outside the kitchen, watching us.

I lowered my voice. "Please, Fane. Just get me out of here."

Fane lifted his chin at Henry and Gavin. They nodded back.

I followed Fane out to his car.

"They think we're together," I said once we were inside.

"That's the assumption," Fane replied. "I didn't correct them. I suppose it'll be easier for you to infiltrate the enemy camp if you have an excuse to keep their teeth out of you."

"I don't consider them enemies," I said.

Fane gripped the steering wheel. "And me?"

"You saved me." I swallowed. "But it doesn't matter how I feel about you."

Fane sighed. "At least now I understand why you broke it off. You were never with Dante, were you?"

"No."

"Good."

I scratched at a tear on the passenger seat. "What about Valerie? Did you get back together with her?"

Fane didn't answer.

I looked at him. "Did you?"

Fane sighed. "Aurora, I buried two men tonight."

"They weren't men."

"Oh, that's right. And neither am I."

"That's not what I meant."

"Look, maybe we should discuss this another time. Let's just get you home."

"I don't want to go home."

"Where do you want to go?"

"With you."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

Fane tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. "Fine. Just for tonight."

We rode out the remainder of the drive in silence. Joss was so relieved to see Fane back unharmed that he didn't stop to question my return.

"I'm fine, really," Fane said as Joss pestered him to sit and relax.

"I'll get you some blood," Joss said. "Don't worry. I didn't let her drink it all."

Fane looked at me suddenly. "*You* drank blood?"

"Guzzled it down like a nomad come across water in the desert," Joss confirmed. "Be right back with a warm mug."

I lowered myself onto the cushion beside Fane and placed my hands inside my lap. I stared at my fingernails, acutely aware of Fane studying me.

"Funny thing about blood," he said slowly. "It has the ability to revive one almost instantly…or such is the case with vampires."

Lucky for me I had access to the antidote. I planned on remaining human for the rest of my natural life. Maybe Melcher would let me have a double shot after everything I'd been through. Couldn't be too safe.

I stood. "Mind if I get some rest?"

Fane gave me a dark look. "Are you sure you wouldn't prefer to wait until sunrise?"

I stared at him so long my eyes went out of focus.

Finally he sighed and said, "Down the hall, second door on the right. You can use my bed. I won't bother you."

Once inside Fane's bedroom, I stripped down to my underwear and slid under his covers. Despite his taunt about sunrise, I did sleep—I slept wrapped in the scent of him. It was a pale second to Fane's actual arms, but it was all I had.

Sometime very early in the morning, I awoke with a sore throat. I eased

out of bed and began opening Fane's dresser drawers until I found a T-shirt. Once I'd slipped it over my head, I tiptoed down the hallway.

Fane was asleep on the couch. His chest rose and fell steadily beneath a blanket. My eyes rested on his mismatched lips. No more kisses. Not between a vampire and a hunter.

I needed a drink of water. But upon entering the kitchen, I went to the fridge, not the sink. The blood bags glowed beneath a single light bulb. I stood there, staring. The cold air seeped over my legs in a cool caress.

"Looking for something?"

Fane's voice startled me out of my trance. I hated the way my gasp made me sound as though I'd been caught red handed.

"I thought there might be some juice in the fridge."

I stared at the floor until I noticed Fane was barefoot. My eyes traveled up his black cotton sleep bottoms to his naked torso.

Forget about the blood. He looked delicious in the dark.

The Cheshire teeth came out once more as Fane smiled and looked me in the eye. "I've seen that look before."

And suddenly I felt like we were finishing a decade's old conversation. The first time Fane said it I desperately wanted him to complete his thoughts, but then Valerie dragged him away. The second time he'd brushed it off.

Now I willed him not to continue, but I could tell from the smile on his face that nothing would give him greater pleasure than to pull the rug out from under me.

"You died in that car accident didn't you?"

I squeezed my lips shut. Fane pushed the fridge door closed with one hand. He took a step closer. Much too close. His lips were inches from mine when he lifted my chin with his fingers.

"I've seen that look on the dead." Fane stared into my eyes. "That vacant, hollow look when life ends yet continues forever."

What if the antidote had failed? What if I'd lost too much blood and somehow the virus had kicked in?

I pulled away. "No," I said, shaking my head. "I'm not a vampire."

Fane's smile widened.

I'm not.

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SUMMARY

Love bites.

Probation sucks.

Thanks to Dante's recklessness, Aurora is now partners with Valerie: the redheaded, backstabbing vixen.

Dante is in full flirt mode. Fane's tactics are more ruthless. Something carnal has awakened in Aurora and neither boy is helping tame her cravings.

When a member of the unit's team is found dead, Aurora and Valerie are sent after a vampire in Sitka, but Aurora suspects the killer's much closer to home.

Book 2 of 6

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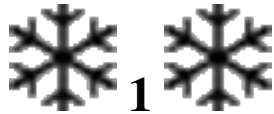

1
Sinners and Saints

If fate were kind the only thing I'd have to kill tonight is time.

Our target home, one of two, had yet to draw their curtains, lighting the inside like an aquarium as the last traces of daylight receded into the shadows.

The switch from day to dusk happened in a matter of seconds, at least in Alaska, turning everything black and white.

My tennis shoes crunched over the salted walkway, grinding down pieces so big they felt like small pebbles under my feet. Tennis shoes in winter—not really the best way to keep my toes toasty. Neither was the short pleather jacket, but my parka and winter boots felt too heavy on a mission.

There was no way our targets lived here. A vamp house with skylights… about as likely as the red, white, and pink Valentine's Day flag hanging off the garage.

I wanted to ram a dagger through the limp heart as I passed the stupid flag on the march to the front door. Even if I didn't eschew vandalism, I couldn't have. Not since Agent Melcher revoked my right to bear arms.

Melcher's idea of easing Dante and I back into active duty came down to assigning us each an informant/stand-in assassin. Our duty, our *only* duty, tonight was to do the poisoning (i.e. get bit) then step aside and let our partner go in for the kill.

"No way, I'm all about follow up," Dante said the moment he heard we were on probation.

"You're lucky we're sending you back in the field," Agent Crist had snapped.

She and Melcher weren't very happy with how Dante's "training" mission with me in Fairbanks resulted in the death of an informant and human, followed by the vampire Renard and his cohorts tracking us down in Anchorage. Of course, Dante missed all that while the Natives in Kotzebue honored his slaying of a rabid vampire with a blanket toss and an all-you-can-eat moose buffet. Dante returned with a bear claw strung from a leather cord around his neck, puffed up like Popeye on spinach until Agents Crist and Melcher lit into him.

Melcher called the incident "too close for comfort."

I still didn't see the harm in keeping a knife hidden in case things went south. I'd been out of combat training for a week while I recovered from the multiple stabbings Renard's crony inflicted over my body.

Great way to start my second week at a new school.

Strep throat. That's what Melcher's doctor's note said.

More like stabbed throat.

If we ended up with the vamp house, I wouldn't mind stepping aside and

letting my *partner* take the beating. To add insult to injury, Melcher assigned Valerie to me and Noel to Dante.

We hadn't spoken since the moment we climbed inside Valerie's red Honda Civic.

Once our addresses checked out we were free to part ways. The sooner the better.

Two nights ago, a pizza delivery boy headed out on his route and never returned. The next morning a jogger found his body at Westchester Lagoon, naked and drained. Melcher felt certain the culprit resided at one of the five homes on the boy's delivery route. When the police questioned them, every resident said they never received their order. The manager at Midnight Pie confirmed that every household on the route had called in to complain that their pizza never arrived.

Dante and Noel were assigned three of the five addresses, Valerie and I the remaining two. The manager at Midnight Pie could only guess which residence the driver headed to first, though he believed the police's theory that the boy had been killed in a carjacking before ever reaching the first home.

The home in front of me did not emit evil. From ten feet away I saw a colorful welcome mat and floral wreath on the door.

Valerie flipped her head from side to side, sending strawberry-brown waves over the shoulders of her pea coat. She looked older without her usual wench's costume.

We walked in sync, neither of us wanting to follow the other's lead. As we bumped shoulders to get to the porch, I spoke my first words. "There's no way this is a vamp house."

"Could be a cover. You'd be surprised the lengths some vamps will go to hide their activities. I've seen it all." Valerie lifted her nose. "I've been doing this a lot longer than you."

"Congratulations," I said, reaching for the doorbell.

Bing, bong.

A woman in her late thirties came to the door smiling until she noticed the pamphlet in my hand.

"Good evening," I said cheerfully. "We're here to talk to you about Christ our Savior."

"Oh, umm. This really isn't a good time. We're about to eat."

"Is there a better time we could come back?" Valerie asked, suddenly all smiles.

"Umm…"

My relief at not stumbling upon a vamp house outweighed my embarrassment at interrupting a family's dinner with our phony solicitation.

Valerie and I stared at the woman with twin smiles.

"I don't think so, but thanks for stopping by." The woman quickly closed the door.

"God bless you," Valerie said sweetly. She rolled her eyes the moment

the door slammed shut. “Maybe Dante and Noel are having better luck.”

“They haven’t called,” I said, heading back to Valerie’s car.

She quickly matched my strides, sprinting for the driver’s side as though we were racing for it. At least Valerie respected the speed limit, unlike Dante. Thinking about him made me snort. I had a hard time picturing him sitting back while petite Noel rammed a knife in a vamp’s heart. Then again, he’d left me in Fairbanks to do just that without even sticking around. That’s what had gotten us into this mess to begin with.

The Honda’s headlights slipped across the mailboxes in the next neighborhood. Porch lights dotted the homes up and down the street. All but one house tucked back in the shadows of the yard’s prickly spruce trees.

Valerie came to a stop along the curb, three houses from our last address. She stuck her face in front of the review mirror and dabbed gloss on her rouged lips.

I might have kept my mouth shut but then she started rubbing and smacking her lips together.

The thought of those lips all over Fane’s made me want to shove the tube of gloss down her throat. It was bad enough that she blackmailed me into breaking up with him, but Valerie had taken it one step further, reinstating herself as Fane’s bitch the moment I stepped aside…or so my source told me. Fane neither confirmed nor denied this the last time we were together. I might have felt guilty over the way it all went down if he hadn’t moved on so quickly.

“We’re on a mission, not a date,” I snapped.

Valerie’s lips *smacked* as she gave her reflection one last pucker. She shot me a sly look.

“Maybe I have a date afterwards.”

Turns out Melcher had been wise to ban me from carrying a weapon. The temptation to do bodily harm to the vixen could strike me at any moment. Like right now.

For a brief second I hoped we’d get the vamp house. I wouldn’t mind watching Valerie get roughed up a bit.

“You’re despicable,” I said.

Valerie smiled with her now shiny lips. “All’s fair in love and war.”

“I could report you to Melcher.”

Valerie smirked. “You wouldn’t risk it. You care about Fane too much.”

“More than you, obviously.”

“Get over yourself, Aurora. I’d never rat out Fane. We have too much… *history*.”

As my fingers stretched down my leg, I had to remind myself yet again that I was unarmed.

“You dated him when you knew from the beginning it was forbidden,” I said. “I didn’t realize he was a vampire until later.”

Valerie faced me. “You moved in on Fane when you knew he was

taken." Her words dripped with scorn.

My mouth opened and closed. She sorta had me there. I did kiss Fane on a public bus when they were still together. Not that I could have known for sure. People break up all the time in high school. It's not like I kept tabs on my classmates' romantic status twenty-four seven. Besides, Fane followed me onto the bus, not the other way around.

Valerie took my silence as acknowledgement of guilt.

"Nothing to say? That's what I thought."

I yanked open the car door. "Let's get this over with so we can go our separate ways."

Valerie slammed her door shut. Good thing we weren't trying to sneak up on anyone. She stormed down the sidewalk. Small wonder she slowed down when I did in front of the house hidden behind a patch of spruce trees.

A set of fresh tire tracks led through the snow to a rusted Oldsmobile beneath the carport.

I headed straight for the plastic trash bin by the side of the car with Valerie hot on my heels.

"What are you doing?"

I didn't answer as I pulled the lid off the bin and placed it quietly on the ground. "Look," I said, nodding into the can.

The vamps hadn't even bothered covering the pizza boxes, a whole stack of them, with other refuse. I lifted the cardboard cover.

Not even a slice missing.

Valerie pushed down the cardboard lid with a huff. "We're not here to go through their trash." She shook her hair over her shoulders. "Let's do this."

Before I could respond, she charged towards the front porch. So Valerie was the jump in head first kind of girl? Why wasn't I surprised?

Valerie knocked on the door.

Five seconds later a young twenty-something man stuck his head out. His greasy hair reminded me of the uneaten pizza sitting in the garbage can.

He didn't say anything, or maybe he didn't have time.

"Do you believe in Jesus?" Valerie demanded.

She leaned forward with her whole body. Valerie didn't have to put on an act—righteousness came naturally to her.

The man looked Valerie and I up and down, his lips forming a sneer. "Boy, did you chicks pick the wrong house."

I stepped forward, waving my pamphlet in front of him. "I think we came to exactly the right house. Are your parents home?"

He scoffed at that. "I don't have parents."

"You live alone?" Valerie demanded.

"Me and my two roommates."

Oh joy. Three against two. And while Valerie's personality might be toxic, her blood would be no help knocking these creatures out. How the hell was I going to get three vampires to feed on me at the same time? At least I

was all juiced up from the stabbing incident.

Calling for backup would've been the smart move, but Valerie had already gotten up in the vampire's face.

"I bet you boys could use some God in your lives."

There's no way Valerie would want to share this bust. The excitement practically bounced off her eyeballs.

"May we come in for a few minutes?" I asked. I couldn't have Valerie thinking I'd wimp out.

The greasy-haired vampire glanced over our shoulders into the dark yard. The bushy spruce needles blocked out most of the neighbors.

"If you insist." He pulled back the door and motioned with his arm to come inside.

Valerie and I stepped forward, placing our first foot on the hardwood floor in unison.

The entry led directly into an open dining room. Two young men, vampires presumably, sat at the table sorting through a mountain of mail. One had piercings in his ears, nose, eyebrow, and chin. He shot me a menacing glare. "What the hell is this?"

The doorman sniggered. "These young ladies from the church want to save us."

"We ain't the ones who need saving."

I lifted my chin. "I think you are."

Pierced guy's chair scraped the wood floor when he pushed back from the table. His companion followed suit.

While it wasn't exactly wise to turn my back on my enemies, I didn't want to trap myself between the china hutch and dining table, either. I went for the living room, spinning around in the center as though prepared to deliver a sermon rather than a battle cry. The pamphlet I'd waved in Greasy Guy's face at the front door crinkled in my hand. If only I could use it to squish them like flies.

Heavy curtains over the living room windows blocked out any passing cars. Good, no witnesses.

Pierced dude and Greasy Guy followed closely behind me.

"Now, where were we?" I asked.

"You were about to beg for your life," the pierced vamp said.

His tongue ring glinted as he spoke. It made a 'screw you, I eat silver for breakfast' kind of statement.

"No," I said, shaking my head. "I was about to save you."

The lips on the pierced vamp drew back so far I could see his sharpened molars.

Jackpot, I thought, right before the vampires closed in on me.

"You bitches came to the wrong house."

Oh, we were at the right house all right. The pamphlet fell from my fingers settling by my feet on the hardwood floor. What did vampires have

against carpeting? Or heating? I had to hand it to them for practicality. Great way to save on the electric bill and prevent bodies from decomposing too quickly.

Silver Tongue socked me across the face. I had no time to duck. I'd been expecting teeth not a fist. My face snapped sideways. Neck realignment would have to wait until later.

I dropped to the floor before the second blow connected with my jaw. Kneepads would have been nice, I thought, as pain exploded through my leg joints. The words "Jesus Loves You" looked up at me from the pamphlet, receding as Greasy Guy hauled me up by the shoulders.

Not ten minutes from here, Dante was preaching the gospel to some innocent household waiting to see if they took the bait or shooed him away.

Naturally, I'd get the house with the vampires in it.

I squirmed against the vampire holding me.

A bloodcurdling scream ripped through the house followed by crashing glass.

No surprise Valerie screamed like a banshee. The third vampire staggered away from the china hutch's splintered glass. Valerie must have shoved him right through the wood frame. She cupped her left eye in one hand and gripped her dagger in the other.

I elbow jabbed Greasy Guy when he turned his attention to the commotion. He grunted but didn't let go. His arms circled my chest to get a better hold. With Silver Tongue approaching I had to do something, so I bit down on my captor's arm as hard as I could. He screamed and let go.

Take that, you homicidal, bloodsucking savage. Bet he wasn't used to getting bit.

I spit his blood out on the floor. My second taste of vampire blood wasn't any better than the first. Two weeks ago, Renard force-fed me blood from his wrist. Now that I'd tried it again, I could say there was definitely something off about the taste of vampire blood.

Not like human blood.

Silver Tongue smiled. "I see the church still promotes violence."

Before I could answer, he had my arm in a bone-crushing grip. A yelp escaped my lips before I could suppress it. Silver Tongue twisted harder.

Oh God, he was going to break my arm. Just bite me, damn it!

Right before my bones felt ready to snap, Greasy Guy yanked me away from Silver Tongue and smacked me across the face. It stung but at least he didn't punch.

Before I could land a blow of my own, he pushed me backwards toward Silver Tongue. The jerk laughed and flung me back to his crony who mimicked his laughter and motion. Back and forth they pushed me as though tossing a ball across the room. It reminded me of a nature program I once saw of two killer whales playing with a seal before they ate it.

The next time I landed against Greasy Guy, I twisted around and dug my

nails into his shoulder. He stumbled as he tried to push me away. Before he had a chance to fight me off, I bit straight through his t-shirt to the skin beneath.

He screamed and then grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me. “So you like to bite, do you?”

Without preamble, he leaned forward and bit my neck.

Silver Tongue took me by the arm. “Better say your prayers,” he said into my ear.

He took my earlobe between his teeth and bit down. What started out as a pinch turned into excruciating pain as his teeth pressed through my skin. What if he tried to tear off my entire earlobe? I shrieked so loud I was convinced I would have shattered the glass door on the china hutch if it weren’t already broken.

Greasy Guy fell to the floor convulsing, but Silver Tongue didn’t notice. He released my earlobe and covered his own ears while I screamed, then leaned back in to bite my neck. I never saw him convulse.

“Motherfucker!” Valerie screamed right before she plunged her dagger in Silver Tongue’s back.

He fell forward, nearly taking me down with him.

Valerie held on tight to her knife. Once Silver Tongue hit the floor face first, she pushed him onto his back with the heel of her boot. He looked dead, but that didn’t stop Valerie from kicking him in the side.

The greasy-haired guy twitched on the floor. His eyes widened as Valerie went for him next.

“Son of a bitch!” she yelled, once she finished him off.

She had a shiner around her left eye.

Even though it hurt, the smile was worth it. “Better cancel that date, Val. You don’t look so hot.”

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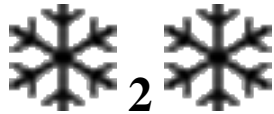

2
This Is Not a Date

After calling in the cleaners, Valerie and I jostled for a place in front of the vampires' bathroom mirror.

"Just perfect!" Valerie said, placing a finger on the skin swelling around her eye.

At least she hadn't been bit.

I pulled out what I hoped was a clean towel from the cabinet and wet the corner. I wiped the blood off both sides of my neck. Now that the bites were cleaned up, they looked like red ring marks burned onto my skin. I kept an iridescent midnight blue scarf tucked inside my pocket. I pulled it out now and wrapped it around my neck. It was dark enough to hide bite marks, lightweight enough to stuff inside a purse or pocket.

I looked at Valerie's reflection in the mirror, briefly wondering what happened to her to end up working for the agents. Even if I could bring myself to ask, I doubt she'd answer.

Before heading out, I threw the towel I'd used on top of Silver Tongue's body for the cleaners to dispose of.

By the time we made it on base, Dante and Noel had beaten us back. Valerie and I flashed our passes one last time before heading down the hallway for Agent Melcher and Crist's office. The agents were seated at their desks. Noel sat hunched over in a chair inspecting the ends of her hair. Dante leaned against the wall, one foot propped up. He wore a knit sweater over khakis. It gave him a churchy look with the exception of the bear claw hanging from his neck.

Dante began applauding the moment Valerie and I entered.

"Bravo, ladies, bravo." He clapped louder.

Crist cleared her throat. "That's enough, Dante."

Valerie rewarded Dante with a full-on voluptuous smile. Her eye had started to swell shut on the drive over, but there wasn't a smudge around her glossed lips.

"Took down all three by myself."

Ah-hem.

"I wasn't exactly sitting there reading the Sunday funnies," I said.

"I can see that," Dante said, pushing away from the wall and coming to my side. He ran his fingers along my hairline, stopping at my temple. "Looks like they tried to take off your ear."

I shot Valerie a look of triumph. That's right, you vampire stealing strumpet. We vampire hunters stick together.

"Back to business," Crist said. "Valerie, Aurora—report."

"I knew the moment I saw the pizza boxes in their trash bin," I said at the

same time Valerie launched into her account of taking down the vamps single-handedly.

We glared at each other.

"Good work, team," Melcher said. "The community and law enforcement officials might not be aware of it, but justice has been served."

Crist nodded her agreement.

"Aurora, Valerie, well done," Melcher said in a way that didn't invite response.

He looked the same as he always did: trim hair cut like a choir boy's, wrinkle-free suit, and a smug smile.

"Now I want you all to rest up. Unless we have an emergency on our hands, I'm keeping you off assignment for the rest of the month."

"Off assignment," Dante repeated, pulling away from me.

My skin prickled in the last place his fingers had touched.

"I thought after this you were putting us back on assignment."

Melcher stared across his desk. "It's not up for debate, Dante."

Dante might've been a loose cannon, but he also knew when to roll with the punches. His mouth stretched into a wide grin. "Guess I no longer have an excuse for avoiding my term paper."

Melcher opened a drawer on his desk. "That reminds me. Aurora, Valerie, you need to stay home the rest of the week. Your bruises would draw too much attention."

Melcher leaned across the desk, holding out two slips of paper. I took mine and read over it quickly.

Great, another doctor's note.

Valerie glared at her note. Hopefully hers said "herpes."

"I'll drive you home," Dante said to me, looking sideways at Valerie.

"Thanks."

"Aurora, we'd like to talk to you a moment before you go," Melcher said.

Noel's eyes met mine for the first time since I'd walked in. She'd gotten off her chair and headed to the door. She shot me a thin-lipped smile. "See you at school."

"Next week," I replied, holding up my doctor's note.

"Right," Noel said, grimacing. "Sorry."

"I'll be waiting in the hall," Dante said. He was the last to leave the room.

Melcher gave me the friendly fatherly smile once Dante closed the door. He leaned forward on his arms. "How are you feeling, Aurora?"

I looked him in the eyes. "Great."

"Have you had any more…*cravings*?"

I knew what Melcher was getting at. The last time they patched me up I'd asked point-blank, "Am I turning into a vampire?"

Melcher said blood cravings were one of the nasty side effects of the

virus cocktail the government had pumped through my veins while I was on death's door.

"No." The lie came out with such conviction, Melcher dropped it at once.

"Good work, Sky," he said, straightening up. "We are extremely impressed by your commitment to duty."

Even Crist nodded her agreement. The pinch-faced woman wasn't my biggest fan. She wasn't really anyone's fan besides Melcher's.

I wondered if they ever did the nasty. Gross. So did not want to know. My mind had done that a lot since the transfusion—tossed sick and twisted thoughts inside my head like an erotic dinner salad. Besides, it wouldn't surprise me if Melcher was celibate or something, like a monk. Probably even flogged himself at night out of sexual frustration. Again…gross!

I took a step backwards.

"Is that all?"

"Take some time off," Melcher said. "You've earned it."

Take some time off? I had a little over three months until graduation and all this time off wasn't exactly impressing my teachers. I once dreamed of going to college at Notre Dame. Now I just wanted to get my damn high school diploma before some vamp did me in. My list of goals had changed dramatically in the last couple weeks. At the top: graduate from high school.

When I walked out of the agents' office, I saw that Dante hadn't wandered far. He leaned against the secretary's desk fingering his precious bear claw with one hand while using his other hand to make a stabbing motion. The woman behind the desk didn't so much as crack a smile. She sat ramrod straight, bun at the nape of her neck, dressed in camouflage.

"Hey," I said.

Dante turned. His widening grin was enough to get a smile out of me.

"Ready to roll?" he asked.

"Let's blow this joint."

Dante straightened up. "Nice chatting, Steph."

"Stephanie," the secretary replied gruffly.

I bumped shoulders with Dante as we headed down the sterile hallway.

"I take it you didn't score digits."

Dante laughed. "Negative." He leaned in closer. "Everything A-ok with agents Mulder and Scully?"

I snort-laughed. That's what I loved about Dante. It was hard to take life too seriously with him nearby.

"All good," I replied. "Melcher's impressed with how I'm holding up."

"Well, he should be. You conquered the mountain, battled Goliath, and came out on top." Dante stopped abruptly and placed a hand on his chest. "My protégé. I'm so proud."

I gave him a playful smack. "Get over yourself."

Beatings and bitings aside, it gave me comfort to end the evening by climbing into Dante's Jeep rather than back into the vixen-mobile.

Dante started her up. “Hey, you hungry? Let’s get something to eat.”

I wasn’t hungry, but I didn’t want to go home either. Dad was still MIA, and a week ago mom stopped getting dressed altogether. I wasn’t exactly chomping at the bit to get home and watch her mope around in her bathrobe and slippers.

I fastened my seatbelt. “Why not?”

“Great, I have a wicked craving for pizza.”

“Of course you do,” I said, rolling my eyes.

Dante’s eyes darted from the road to his speedometer. He braked at the deserted four-way stop. Even Dante knew enough to respect the speed limit on base.

“Lady luck,” Dante said cheerfully. “Even with the odds in my favor, you get the vamp house and get paired with Red. I bet she’s a ball of fire in action.”

“Hey! Don’t forget my warning about Valerie.”

“Right, no hooking up.” Dante shot me a sly look. “Red’s not my color anyway.”

If he wanted me to ask what color did it for him, I wasn’t taking the bait.

Dante chuckled softly when I made no comment and drove more or less responsibly to Moose’s Tooth.

“I look like shit,” I said, glancing in his review mirror.

“You look good to me,” Dante said.

I bee-lined it for the women’s restroom while he got us a table. Like my old friends at Denali High, the Mousekeeters, I never left home without concealer.

Valerie wasn’t the only one with a shiner. I dabbed a pale shade of liquid concealer around my left eye then touched up with powder. I couldn’t do anything about my ear. God, it looked kinky with teeth marks practically piercing the lobe. Is that how Silver Tongue got his piercings?

I started for the door then turned around. At the bottom of my purse I dug out a tube of red lipstick. If I couldn’t cover my bruises completely, maybe I could divert attention to my mouth. I grabbed a square of tissue paper out of the stall and blotted my lips then finger brushed my long black hair over my ears. There. Halfway decent.

Dante had already nabbed us a booth by the time I came out. He whistled as I approached the table. “You clean up good, Sky.”

“Thanks,” I said, sliding into the bench across from him.

Dante didn’t look at me long; his eyes were already devouring the laminated menu.

“I’m hungry,” he said.

“You’re always hungry.” I countered.

Dante didn’t look up from the menu. “And you’re never hungry.”

“Dante . . .” I started then stopped.

Dante lowered his menu. “What?”

"Never mind."

"What?"

When I didn't answer, he leaned forward with a goofy face. "Sky, what?"

I grabbed my set of silverware and unwrapped the napkin around it.

"Have you ever noticed that food no longer has any taste?" I stared at my silverware as I spoke.

Dante started to laugh then stopped when he saw my face.

"You're serious?"

I nodded.

"That's not the only thing. I feel a lot more sensitive to sun. Like the other day it cleared up and . . . I don't know. It made me feel sick."

"Jesus, Sky. You sound paranoid."

"Maybe." I shrugged.

"Anything else?"

Our eyes locked. I could feel my cheeks heating.

Dante leaned forward when I didn't answer.

Hell would freeze over before I told him how sexual I'd been feeling—my head was in the gutter pretty much twenty-four seven. It felt like a scratch that needed itching.

I focused on the bear claw around Dante's neck rather than his face.

It didn't help that I felt gypped losing my virginity to jock-boy Scott Stevens. At least I didn't have to pass him in the hallway anymore.

Only one person, or vampire rather, knew how to get my blood pumping: Francesco "Fane" Danado.

I hadn't seen him since my abduction when Noel had taken a risk and called him for help. He and Noel walked in right after I finished off Renard's cohort James. If they hadn't patched me up, I would have bled to death. While I recovered, Fane went after the last of my captors. But Anchorage's most popular undead socialite, Marcus, had already taken care of them. The man's upscale parties were strictly no kill zones…unless, of course, Marcus did the killing.

I'd decided to turn a blind eye on that. For one thing, Marcus had killed vampires, not humans. And he spared me and Fane from having to get our hands bloody. But Fane did have to dispose of the bodies at the dump with the help of Noel's favorite vamps, Henry and Gavin.

Fane hadn't been too happy about that, which surprised me. I assumed a vampire would be used to that sort of thing.

But no, he was a kisser not a killer.

Not that I'd received so much as a goodbye kiss.

The last night I stayed over we slept separately then talked half the night. Fane knew I'd lied about hooking up with Dante, and he understood why. I was a vampire hunter. He was a vampire. We could never be together.

He accused me of being a vampire created to kill her own kind. I vehemently denied this. How could a person not know they were dead?

"We'll see," Fane had said.

As long as I took the antidote every month I would remain human. Melcher said they had already started testing a yearly injection and were working on a five-year antidote. I had no doubt the scientists would come up with a stronger failsafe.

I was still lost in Aurora land when our waitress walked up to the table.

"Do you know what you want?"

Dante set his menu down. "I'll have a pitcher of your IPA, the mozzarella breadsticks, and a large chicken ranch pizza. No garlic."

No garlic? Sounded like I wasn't the only one with sensitivities.

The waitress turned to me. "And for you?"

"The raspberry vinaigrette salad, and we'll take the breadsticks without the cheese."

Dante groaned after our waitress left. "Sky, you're killing me. I still *do* have taste buds, you know?"

"Well, there will be plenty of cheese on your pizza. I'm sure you'll live."

"Barely."

Dante cheered up as soon as his beer arrived. "Want some?" he asked after filling his pint glass.

"I'm eighteen."

"Didn't the agents upgrade your ID?"

I laughed. "I'm sure this isn't what they had in mind."

"Come on, Sky," Dante said, tapping the table with his fingers. "Live a little. Besides, you earned it."

I shook my head, smiling. "I'll pass on the mud water."

Dante gulped the *mud water* down happily. The pint was nearly empty before he set it on the table.

"Look, you have nothing to worry about," he said, leaning over the table. "There's an adjustment period after the transfusion. Our bodies aren't the same. We're…"

"I know," I said with a roll of my eyes. "Super human."

Dante laughed. "That's right."

He poured himself another glass of beer. My salad arrived shortly after, but the breadsticks took longer. My plate was nearly clean when the heaping pile of warm, doughy bread arrived.

Since food had lost a lot of its taste, I often focused on texture and temperature. I liked the warmth in my mouth as I chewed.

Dante practically moaned, devouring his first breadstick within seconds. He grabbed another breadstick and held it up, shaking it in front of my face. "How can you not taste this doughy goodness?"

The breadstick flopped around as he waved it.

"Dante?"

A pretty blonde in a sporty ski jacket stood at the edge of our table. Dante's lips were still curved into a gigantic smile.

"Hi, Ashley."

I waited for Dante to explain who Ashley was. He didn't. From the way she glared at me, there had to be a history between them.

She stared pointedly at me, but Dante didn't get the hint.

"Are you ready for tomorrow's exam?" she finally asked.

"Ready as I'll ever be."

"How did you do on last week's paper?"

"Pretty decent."

Ashley stood at the end of our table for several beats. When it was clear Dante wasn't going to engage her in mindless chitchat she finally said, "Well, enjoy your dinner."

"See you in class," he said, completely oblivious.

I hoped Ashley was going rather than coming, but she took a seat at a corner table with an older couple—facing me. Great, cause I so enjoyed being glared at while I ate.

In the time it took Miss Frowny to get to her table, Dante had already devoured his second breadstick and moved on to his third.

"Ex-girlfriend?" I asked.

"Ashley?" Dante asked, surprised. "She's engaged to an art major."

"Okay," I said slowly. "Then why the evil eye?"

"Evil...oh, I've taken her best friend out on a couple dates."

I raised both brows. "She's not going to be happy when she hears you were spotted with another woman."

Dante chewed a couple more times then swallowed. "We're not a couple. Besides, if Christine isn't comfortable with me having female friends then she's with the wrong guy."

I gave Dante a pointed look. "It does look like we're on a date, though."

Dante planted both hands on the tabletop. "You think this is me on a date?"

I lowered my forehead in confusion.

Dante also lowered his head and gave me a hooded look. Maybe it was supposed to be smoldering. I laughed, thinking he was joking around again, but his lips didn't even twitch. He kept staring.

"Has anyone ever told you that you have the most luscious lips?" Dante reached for my hand.

"What are you doing?" I asked in alarm when he stroked my wrist.

"Your skin is so soft." There was nothing playful about Dante's tone or the way he looked at me. "I'd like to feel your skin naked against mine."

"Hey!" I said, snatching my hand back.

Dante leaned back, smiling. "I bet your heart's beating a little faster."

"Only because you're freaking me out."

I broke off a piece of breadstick and threw it at him.

Dante laughed. He picked up the piece of bread where it bounced onto the table and lifted it to his lips. I thought he'd pop it in his mouth, but at the

last second he chucked it back at me.

I threw it back. Dante reached for the plate and threw a whole breadstick at me.

I laughed. I felt much more comfortable with immature Dante rather than flirty, unsettling Dante. Ashley glared at our table. I'd momentarily forgotten about her.

I nodded in Ashley's direction. "Christine is so dropping you."

"Yeah," Dante said with a shrug. "Probably."

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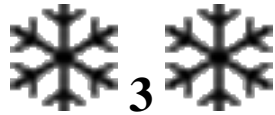

3
You're Invited

Back inside the Jeep, Dante had his iPod blasting George Michael's "Outside." He swayed side-to-side while driving, singing, and tapping on the steering wheel. Dante joined George, singing about how he was done with the sofa, hall, and kitchen table.

I rolled my eyes when he leaned towards me while singing about taking things outside.

I cleared my throat. "Speaking of outside...mind keeping your eyes on the road?"

Dante sang back in return.

God, I swear he had a playlist titled "Songs for Annoying Aurora."

"Wanna come over?"

It took me a moment to register that Dante was asking a real question, not singing lyrics. I looked sideways at him, momentarily speechless.

"I'll let you touch my claw." Dante glanced down.

I burst out laughing. "You are such a dork."

A dangerous dork. The whole 'naked skin against mine' comment still concerned me.

"I should get home before my mom starts to worry."

Doubtful. Every day after school she ran a little later than the previous one. Yesterday she forgot to pick me up entirely. Well, not exactly forgot so much as slept through the afternoon until my phone call woke her up.

While I'd gotten over my car phobia for the most part, I hadn't overcome my driving phobia. Too bad I didn't live in a city with a cool underground metro system.

"Oh, right," Dante said, turning down the music. "How is Mrs. Sky? Still making those delicious cookies?"

More like eating them straight from the manufacturer's box.

"She's okay. She just misses my dad. He's not around much."

Or ever. I had confided in Fane, but I didn't feel like telling Dante my dad had taken off. Dante wasn't capable of taking anything seriously. It went against his nature.

"At least she's got you for company."

"Not for long."

Dante glanced sideways at me. "No?"

"As soon as I graduate I'm moving into my own place."

"Yep, yep," he said, nodding. "That's the way to go. I know your mom will miss you, but it's not like you're leaving the state."

Not anymore. Before my car wreck, I'd actually made it into Notre Dame, my college of choice. Paradise lost.

The traffic light ahead turned yellow. Dante punched the gas and flew through the intersection.

I bit my tongue. If I screamed it would only encourage him.

"A place of your own is a great idea," he said, easing up on the gas pedal. "In our line of work we get home at all times of the night. Your mom's going to have gray hair before she's fifty if she's always staying up waiting for you to get home safely."

And maybe dad would return if I wasn't there. He and Mom could work things out, get back to normal. She needed someone and that someone wasn't me. Even with Notre Dame out of the picture, I craved my own life and privacy.

"Get some rest, Sky," Dante said when he pulled up to my house.

"Good luck on your term paper," I said.

As soon as I shut the passenger door, Dante backed out of the driveway and roared down the street.

I crossed the road to our mailbox to collect the mail.

There was a red padded envelope and a grocery bag stuffed inside the mailbox. I opened the bag first and breathed deep. Inside, folded neatly, was my red scarf—the one Renard had claimed as a trophy after kidnapping me.

It had to be from Fane. He'd been the one to dispose of Renard's body at the dump. I pulled it out slowly and let it unravel. In the dark the scarf looked crimson.

What did this mean?

It had to be a message of some sort. Most likely Fane's way of saying we were finished for good.

My fingers tightened into a fist around the scarf. I looked up the hill toward the woods. Without thinking, I headed toward the path leading into the thicket. Ours was the last house on the hill before a dense patch of forest between us and the next neighborhood.

The spruce trees blocked out the streetlights, but I'd walked through these woods enough times to know them by heart.

The upside of anger is it makes you unafraid.

I inhaled the frosty air, practically panting as I rushed through the woods searching the shadows for a silhouette of a man.

The dry snow crunched beneath my tennis shoes.

I stopped midway through the forest and yelled, "Fane!"

After my voice faded in the night, I listened. No answer. I hadn't expected but rather hoped for one.

Turn around, Aurora. Go home. Standing alone in the woods in the middle of the night wasn't one of my brightest ideas. I still had my phobias, but death wasn't high on the list. Half the time I felt like the walking dead. I wondered if this was how vampires felt, like they'd lost their humanity and could never get it back. The scientists had practically turned me into a vampire. Only a monthly shot of liquid blue prevented that from happening.

Still, the side effects were enough to get a taste of what it felt like to be undead.

I trudged back home. I didn't have far to go.

All the lights were off, but the living room walls flashed with the light from the TV. Mom had *The Vampire Diaries* on. Yeah, seriously. Last week she'd finished reading the *Twilight Saga*. She'd downloaded the first book in the *Sookie Stackhouse/True Blood* series but said it was too sexual for her taste. Naturally, I wanted to check the books out.

She seemed to think she was on some kind of research mission.

In her fragile state, I didn't want to burst her bubble that vampires neither sparkled nor glamored impressionable young ladies into submission. Anyway, it would probably help ease me out of the house if she had the romanticized version of what I had to deal with.

"Hey, Mom."

Her head bobbed around before snatching the remote control. Damon's face froze with his mouth opened wide, eyes closed. I nearly snorted.

"Hi, honey." She swiveled her recliner around with her slippered feet. She had gray sweatpants on beneath her blue bathrobe.

She sounded remotely cheerful. She always did when she watched her shows.

Her smile dropped when she saw the red scarf in my hand.

"Your scarf," she said, numbly.

I'd forgotten about it in my hand. To my mother it represented all the negative changes in our lives, including Dad's departure.

"Oh right," I said, stuffing it back inside the plastic sack. "I found it."

"I like the blue one better," Mom said, nodding at my neck. "It's much prettier."

"Not as warm, though."

"What's that?" she asked, staring at the thick, red envelope in my other hand.

I looked at it for the first time in the light. The package was addressed to me, but there wasn't a return label.

I shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe it's an early Valentine's gift from a secret admirer."

"Someone from West?" Mom asked.

Yeah right, like I was around school enough for anyone to notice me. This time, I really did snort.

"Beats me. Melcher wants me to stay home the rest of the week, so it's not like I'll be able to find out."

Mom nodded absently. Her eyes were already back on the paused screen.

"Well, didn't mean to interrupt your show." I turned to leave. "Dante says hi, by the way."

She smiled. "You should invite him over for dinner again."

"Maybe I would if you put some clothes on," I answered before I could

stop myself.

Her eyes narrowed. She'd developed a bit of an attitude over the past couple weeks.

"I haven't been feeling well, Aurora."

I wasn't in the mood for an argument. "I'll ask Dante what his schedule's like the next time I see him. He said he misses your cookies," I added.

She smiled again. "You should have let me know you were seeing him today. I would have made a batch."

"Next time. Good night, Mom. Don't stay up too late."

Damon resumed speaking before I made it through the kitchen.

I shut myself inside my room, tossing the sack with my scarf onto the bed. I tore open the padded envelope, pulling out the heaviest object first, something small wrapped in red tissue paper. Inside, I found a silver heart attached to a red ribbon choker. The words "Bite Me" were engraved in the center of the heart. I set it aside and dumped the rest of the contents onto my bedspread. Small sets of wrapped candy tumbled out. There were gummy lips, candy hearts, lollipops, and chocolate hearts wrapped in red foil. It was like Cupid's version of Halloween.

A red envelope had tumbled out with the sweets. I tore it open and smiled when I saw the invitation. If one thing could be said for Marcus, the vamp knew how to throw a party.

I opened the tiny bag of gummy lips and began chewing on a piece as I read over the invitation. LOVE BITES it announced. *No kidding*. The "o" in love was a red heart missing a chunk out of the right corner.

LOVE BITES
COCKTAIL PARTY
FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 15TH
DUSK
AT THE PALACE
HOSTED BY MARCUS
WEAR RED OR BLACK

I'd only been to the palace once, but Marcus said I was welcome back anytime. Guess he meant it.

I wondered if Fane was going.

If he brought Valerie I'd rather he didn't.

I put the candy and choker back inside the padded envelope and stuck it, along with the invitation, on my desk then took a shower.

I could still hear the TV downstairs after I finished blow drying my hair. I left my door open a crack. I wasn't big on closed spaces after my initiation with the deranged rabies vampire. I discarded the plastic sack after taking out my scarf. I wrapped it gently around my neck before crawling under my bedcovers. That night I managed to sleep without having any nightmares.

My internal clock woke me up at the usual ungodly hour of five. I had to get up extra early with my new school being across town. Even though I could have lain in bed half the day—not like Mom would notice—I flipped my covers back and put on a pair of long underwear underneath my sweat pants.

I grabbed my iPod off my desk, along with another piece of gummy lips, then walked carefully down the stairs to the entryway.

I did some quick stretches then stepped out into the bitter freeze. Oh yes, I was awake now.

I had started jogging after Renard and his cohorts abducted and attacked me. Morning was my favorite time to run. It's the only time when I felt like there was only me, existing in a world of my own while the rest of humanity slept.

"Believe" from the *Run Lola Run* soundtrack filled my ears as soon as I hit play on my iPod. I ran up the hill to the woods. My feet flew over the forest floor. In no time I reached the neighborhood on the other side and raced past houses with lights beginning to come on as people roused themselves out of bed to prepare for the daily grind.

My mind played over the mission from the evening before and the lack of control I'd felt when the vampires pushed me back and forth. I was tired of getting smacked around.

I ran faster.

Kelly Clarkson's "My Life Would Suck Without You" started up. I hit skip. The next song, "Holding Out For A Hero" by Bonnie Tyler wasn't much better. I really needed to sit down at my laptop and update my playlist.

I jogged in place and scanned my running playlist, selected "You're Going Down" by Sick Puppies, and sprinted the rest of the way home.

I roused my mom out of bed early Monday morning. I wanted time to turn my doctor's note into the office.

I spent all four morning classes at the front of my classrooms, eyes on the teacher or board. No more skipping. No more fighting. No more Fane.

I didn't know anyone in any of my classes except for Noel in fifth period film elective. Every class, I arrived before her. She was always running late because fifth period followed lunch, and Noel spent lunch with Henry and Gavin. Whatever trepidation she'd felt leaving behind her friends Hope and Whitney at Denali High School were quickly dispelled by spending as many school hours as she could with the suave and sexy vampire duo.

I had an open invitation to eat lunch with them, but I didn't feel like sitting at their crowded table in the cafeteria. I spent lunch in a quiet, empty classroom, chewing my food while getting my homework done.

Today I tapped my foot anxiously, hoping Noel wouldn't walk in just as the warning bell binged. As if on cue, she strode into class. Her shiny black

hair looked good with a white turtleneck instead of her usual head-to-toe black. It's as though Noel had taken on a new persona at West. Her usual Goth garb had been replaced by blue jeans and casual dresses. She smiled more. It was nice to see after how distressed she'd been transferring mid-year. Melcher had made her switch schools. Apparently he didn't need two informants in one place. At least, as a junior, Noel had time to get to know her classmates before graduation.

"Hi," I said when Noel took her seat beside me.

"Hey." She grinned from ear to ear.

"How was lunch?"

She smiled bigger. "Gavin entertained us by recounting his first, and subsequently last, snowshoeing experience."

Yeah, hard to picture. Gavin looked more like an indoor than an outdoor vampire. "So what did I miss last week?"

"We watched *Harold and Maude*."

I shook my head. "Never heard of it." Didn't surprise me. Mrs. Campbell rarely picked movies from the twenty-first century. Film class felt a lot like English with assignments centered on old classics.

"It was a cute show," Noel said. "It's about this boy who is obsessed with death and then he meets this old woman and they start dating."

I grunted; not the most ladylike sound. Young person dating someone ancient. How appropriate. Too bad I missed it. I'd just have to rent it from the video store. Then again, I might run into Fane and his companion Joss: lover of foreign films and black tea—hater of humankind.

"Did you receive an invitation to Marcus's Valentine's party?" Noel asked.

"Yeah, I ate all the candy."

Noel laughed.

"Are you going?" she asked.

I shrugged. "It's not as though I have a hot date that night…or any night."

"This party is going to be a hundred times better than a date."

"Melcher did tell us to take the rest of the month off, though I'm sure this isn't what he had in mind."

"Melcher knows about Marcus," Noel said, shocking me speechless.

The final bell rang as I shouted, "What?"

Noel looked from Mrs. Campbell to me and shook her head.

Mrs. Campbell was the kind of teacher who started the moment the bell stopped and not a second later. She loved film, which made her class one of my favorites. Teachers with a passion for their subject tended to make a lasting impression.

Today I spent the period tapping my foot under my desk and my pen on top. If Melcher knew about Marcus wasn't he, and every vampire who fraternized with him, in danger? What if the next assignment involved going

to one of his parties and poisoning guests? Marcus, Henry, and Gavin were all harmless. The thought of tricking them into biting me and then watching as they convulsed on the floor sickened me. There's no way I could stick a knife in their hearts.

How could Noel say such a thing so calmly? She was better at this undercover thing than I gave her credit for. I could have sworn she had a thing for Gavin and Henry and even Marcus, despite his same sex predilection.

Once class ended, Noel and I scooted out of our seats. We walked out side by side. Once we were in the hallway, Noel leaned into me, speaking quickly.

"One of my first assignments as an informant was to work my way into Marcus's crowd. Attending his parties is one of my ongoing duties."

"So you're spying?" I could feel my mouth gaping open.

"I'm keeping an eye on things."

"What about Marcus, Henry, and Gavin? Are they targets?"

Noel shot me a stern look. "Of course not. They're harmless."

My eyes inadvertently lingered on Noel's neck. Beneath her turtle neck I knew she had her own *clean* bites. Gavin and Henry were much more gentlemanly, using teeth specifically sharpened to puncture a person's skin and start the flow of blood without chewing through flesh to the vein.

"My job is to make sure no humans are killed or harmed…unwillingly," Noel added under her breath. "And to keep my ears open about any baddies in the area. A serial killer was stopped last year after I overheard some vamps complaining about him at one of Marcus's parties." Noel puffed up her chest.

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"It's on a need-to-know basis."

I was just relieved to hear I wouldn't be assigned to kick down the doors of the palace. While Marcus was a hospitable host, I had no doubt he'd be every bit as violent as the baddies I'd come up against if I threatened his existence in any way.

He'd already killed two full-grown male vampires just because they'd caused a stir at his party by abducting me.

Marcus had already boasted to me about his music room—the place he took guests who misbehaved. Knowing Marcus, there probably weren't any instruments inside the music room. He'd even admitted to me that he still enjoyed killing on occasion. *"When they deserve it."*

Renard and his partner certainly deserved to die a real death, but the ease for which Marcus performed the deed unsettled me.

The warning bell rang up and down the halls.

"Look, don't worry," Noel said. "Melcher didn't have me go to all the trouble of getting in with Marcus only to take him down. His gatherings have been a great source of information."

I nodded slowly.

"Okay," she said a bit louder, straightening up. "See you tomorrow."

“See you,” I said, heading for last period.

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4
Flirt

I wasn't in any rush to get to my locker at the end of the day. It only meant freezing my butt off that much longer while I waited for Mom to show up.

Sure enough, there was no sign of the car when I made my way down the shoveled walkway to the pick-up lane in front of the school.

At least I had my scarf back. Maybe it was silly, but it made me feel better having it around my neck. As I fished my iPod out of the front pouch on my backpack, some guy approached flashing a row of perfectly white, perfectly smooth, teeth. He had on a black and orange letterman's jacket. I hadn't even noticed his approach.

"Hi, Aurora."

I squinted at the boy.

"Hi…"

"Mike." He grinned wider. "Are you waiting for someone?"

"My mom." I glanced at the empty pick-up lane. "Late again."

"I can give you a ride home if you need one."

That took me aback. I looked at him closer. Tall, slender, toned, light brown eyes, thick wavy hair—conventionally cute in every way.

I glanced behind Mike's shoulder at the small group of guys, his friends presumably, watching us. They were equally fit and clean cut. Probably part of the popular crowd, not that I knew or cared. I hadn't spent enough time at West to figure out who belonged to the "it" crowd. And I had no intention of finding out.

"Yo, Mikey!" one of Mike's friends called out, sounding arrogant and impatient.

"Just a minute, man." Mike turned back to me. "I don't mind giving you a lift."

"Thanks, but I'm sure she's on her way."

She better be on her way.

Mike flashed me a grin full of confidence. "No problem. See you in class tomorrow."

We had a class together? Lovely, I suppose now I'd have to say 'hi' when I saw him in whatever the hell class we shared.

Call me jaded, but I'd already been through this charade with Scott Stevens back at DHS. The silly smiles and shy hellos. The part where he admitted to having a crush on me. The sloppy, horrible kisses. The even more horrible sex. Pass!

I hit "play" on my iPod before I even got the buds in my ears. "Fake It" by Seether blasted through the speakers. The iPod was still on my running playlist. My foot tapped impatiently.

Just when I was about to call my mom, she drove by and took the turn into the school's parking lot. I walked up to the curb, reaching out for the door handle on the passenger's side before she'd come to a complete stop.

"I'm so sorry, honey," she said as soon as I'd tossed my backpack in the back seat and buckled up.

For once her lateness served my purpose. I'd been struck by a flash of brilliance in fourth period. Grandma had a townhouse only minutes from West and it was unoccupied half the year. Maybe Mom would consider letting me live there given she wouldn't have to drive back and forth across town anymore.

I leaned back in my seat, eyes on the freshly plowed road. "It's okay," I began. "It doesn't seem fair making you drive across town four times a day."

I left a very long pause in the air. There's always that anticipation right before you're about to ask for something you want and don't know if the person will surprise you or shoot you down on the spot.

"I've been thinking. Gran's apartment is only a few blocks away from West, and it's not like she uses it in the winter. If I lived there I could walk to school." It was so perfect. How could she say no? We'd have to ask Grandma, of course, and you never know with her. She'd want to know why I'd transferred in the middle of senior year, why I still wasn't driving, and a thousand other questions, but it would be worth it to get a shot at her apartment. I'd only get about three months out of it before Gran came up for the summer. Just enough time to finish senior year and start looking for on-campus living at the University of Alaska Anchorage.

Mom actually straightened in her seat. Even her voice was on edge. "Out of the question. You're in high school."

"Not for much longer."

"Well, you are now, so we can talk about this again after you graduate."

I could still see Mom's rigid stance out of the corner of my eye. A frosty silence settled inside the car as she pulled away from West. I didn't realized I'd clamped my teeth together so hard until my jaw began to ache.

I heard a small sob and looked over.

"Am I so terrible to live with?" Mom asked in a breaking voice.

Oh, crap. I turned in my seat.

"No, Mom. I just feel really bad making you drive back and forth five days a week."

"I don't mind," she said through sniffles.

There went my dreams of independent living…for now. Hopefully she would be in a less fragile state when I brought it up after graduation. Better yet, maybe Dad would return before then so she wouldn't be alone.

Mom wiped her eyes on her coat sleeve and sniffed. She wore it unzipped over an old sweatshirt and sweatpants. She'd shucked her slippers in favor of a pair of ankle-high winter boots with a fuzzy lining.

She sniffed a couple more times then took her usual detour up Benson

Boulevard's one-way street, swinging back around to Northern Lights. Today she chose the Taco Bell drive-through. In addition to not dressing, she no longer cooked, either.

"Do you want your usual?" she asked as she turned into the parking lot.

Her voice had taken on a much more cheerful tone.

"Sure," I said.

A rice and bean burrito was my usual. It reheated nicer than a taco. Wherever we ended up, Mom always ordered something to warm up later for dinner and a snack for when we got home. The fast food was probably her real motivation for getting off the couch to pick me up every afternoon.

As soon as we got home, I dumped my backpack in my room and changed into my running gear. Mom was eating a taco from the paper wrapping when I came bounding down the stairs. I wasn't always able to get myself up in time to jog before school. On those days I made it up as soon as I got home.

I did my warm-ups in the living room then headed up the hill, music playing gently into my eardrums. I kept the volume down during afternoon runs. There was more traffic, and I liked to keep tabs on it. I'd already been through a gruesome car accident. It would be just my luck to get hit on foot.

I started out with a light jog through the woods then picked up the pace in the adjacent neighborhood. I slowed at the intersection then raced across when it the road was clear. The sidewalk passed in front of a strip mall with a video store, take-out pizza place, and laundromat.

A quick glance at the parking lot revealed no sign of Fane's car.

I don't know why I tortured myself this way on afternoon runs. And I don't know why I thought his car might appear there all of a sudden today. It was probably the scarf. I gave it a gentle tug for reassurance.

Maybe I would have better luck spotting his car if I ran at night. Or better yet, maybe I should let go and move on with my life.

There were other bears in the woods. I snorted to myself. Like pretty boy Mike. Please let the guy back off and leave me alone. That's the trouble with it. Guys liked girls who were a challenge. Maybe tomorrow I should dress up all cutesy and giggle at every sentence that came out of his mouth. That would scare him off. Yeah, right. I could never pull it off with a straight face, but it was a funny thought all the same.

I turned the volume up on my iPod once I reached the stretch of woods leading home.

It turned out Mike and I shared history class together. He plopped into the seat beside me Tuesday morning. He ran his hand over the surface of his desk. I heard a click followed by scraping. I glanced over. In addition to the jacket, he had a big honking class ring on his finger. The orange oval jewel was set in

a gold band. Flashy.

"What's up, Aurora?"

I did my best not to visibly grimace. "Not much. How are you?" I pasted a smile on my face. I was fine with my role as one of West High's nobodies, but I'd sooner graduate without becoming known as The Loner Bitch.

"You're really serious about graduating," Mike remarked.

"What do you mean?"

He nodded towards the board, six feet in front of us. "Sitting in the front row, taking notes all hour."

"Oh," I said.

I looked down at my spiral notebook, already opened to a new page, dated at the top, my pen laced between my fingers.

He chuckled. "We should enjoy our last semester while we can, don't you think? Once we get to college it's all up hill. Textbooks the size of encyclopedias. Lectures designed to cause serious migraines. Late night cram sessions. Never ending homework. You get the idea."

I looked at him with more interest. At least he planned on pursuing a higher education. That kind of conversation made me more comfortable.

"Where are you going to college?" I asked.

Mike's desk moved when he leaned in closer.

"Boise State University. Yep, gonna be a Bronco." He dipped down in his seat as he said this, lifting the front legs of his desk several inches off the ground before hitting the floor again. "What about you?"

This used to be my favorite question. I hated telling people I was staying in-state, like I wasn't adventurous or smart enough to leave Alaska.

"I'm going to the University of Alaska Anchorage," I said without enthusiasm.

I always had to fight back the urge to add that I had been accepted into Notre Dame, but was no use. I'd only have to come up with lies about why I wasn't going. In the end, it didn't impress anyone, anyway. Bottom line: I was an in-state loser.

"You should look into woo-wee," Mike said.

"Woo-wee?"

"W-U-E, Western Undergraduate Exchange. You can go to participating out-of-state colleges for in-state tuition." Mike grinned. "That's what I'm doing. There're a lot of universities in the WUE program. Colleges in Washington, Idaho, Colorado, California, Arizona, Oregon…even Hawaii."

If only my problems were financial. If the government hadn't forced me into a life of servitude, even the WUE colleges wouldn't be far enough away from home. Take me east any day.

"Maybe I'll look into it," I said.

"You totally should. I don't know about you, but I want to get the hell out of dodge come graduation."

Mike succeeded in making me laugh. I was reminded momentarily of the

story Dante shared with me about taking off for Amsterdam after his initiation. He's lucky the agents gave him a second chance. There'd be no European tour for me. No east coast college experience. Not even a western one in the WUE program. My laughter dried up.

Mr. Young walked in and was bombarded by several students. They were still talking to him after the bell rang.

"Hey, why don't come to the school dance with me Friday?"

Ugh, the dreaded proposition. I had to hand it to Mike; he didn't waste time. Maybe that was a senior year thing. *Carpe diem* and all that jazz.

I laughed—a genuine amused laugh. "Isn't this Friday the Sadie Hawkins dance?"

I never got why they always scheduled it around Valentine's Day. Double embarrassment.

"Yeah," Mike said, smiling bigger.

"I hate to break it to you, but boys aren't supposed to do the asking."

Mike shrugged. "I don't mind breaking the rules…for you."

A wave of heat shot through me. I couldn't tell if I was flattered, embarrassed, or both. I wanted nothing more than to hightail it out of the room.

I took a steadying breath before answering. "Thank you. That's really nice, but I'm going to a party Friday night."

"So, do both," Mike said without missing a beat.

"That wouldn't really work."

"The school dances are pretty lame, anyway," he said. "So, what's this party?"

"Nothing special," I said quickly. "Mostly hanging out, drinking. It's an older crowd."

Mike grinned. "I like older crowds." No doubt he liked drinking, too.

Thankfully Mr. Young shooed the last student away from his desk and began calling roll before I had to think of how to respond to Mike's obvious fishing.

I shot out of my desk the moment the bell rang at the end of class.

"See you later," I said to Mike, avoiding eye contact and rushing out of the room. Luckily he didn't follow me out.

Still, I felt unsettled enough to spend lunch with Noel, Henry, and Gavin rather than risk Mike walking by an empty room I happened to be studying in.

"Wow, is that Aurora Sky?" Gavin asked when I approached their table in the cafeteria. He squinted up at me. "I almost forgot you go here."

Henry elbowed him before flashing me a brilliant smile. "Have a seat. It's good to see you."

They looked preppy in their Calvin Klein jeans and sweatshirts. They dressed nice, unlike Fane who had his whole Neo/Matrix look going on. But unlike a moth, I was drawn to the dark.

"Thanks," I said, pulling a chair out beside Noel. "Where's the rest of

your posse?"

"They decided to go out for lunch," Noel said. She looked clearly pleased to have the hunky vamps to herself.

I couldn't blame her. I was glad it was just the four of us.

"You and Fane going to Marcus's party?" Henry asked.

I tried not to flinch. Fane had done me the kindness of letting Henry, Gavin, and Marcus believe we were together so they'd keep their teeth out of me.

"I'm going," I answered evenly, studying the tabletop.

Henry and Gavin exchanged a look.

"What are you wearing?" Noel asked. "Red or black?"

She piled small pieces of orange cheese and sliced turkey onto round crackers from her pre-packaged lunch. Henry and Gavin didn't have lunches. My sack lunch was made up of the standard peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and a Ziploc filled with chips. Noel and I weren't exactly paragons of health.

I had fully intended to wear black to Marcus's party in protest of the dreaded holiday, but that was before I took the public bus to the mall and fell in love with a short red dress. The top had a scoop neck that practically came off the shoulders. The color accented my pale skin and long dark hair in a way black never could.

I needed to look stunning in case Fane showed up with Valerie, although I don't know how we'd explain that one since the only thing warding off potential biters was the fact that Marcus and company thought Fane and I were together. I didn't know how long he'd agree to put on the charade. Returning my scarf could be his way of signaling the end of that.

"Red," I said to Noel. "What about you? I presume you're wearing black."

Henry laughed. He had a great smile. "I'd be willing to put money on it."

"Black's my color," Noel said before popping another cracker sandwich into her mouth.

"And you look great in it," Gavin said.

Noel blushed, which was almost comical. Her color was certainly red at the moment.

Noel turned her attention quickly back to me. "Do you need a ride for the party?"

"That would be great. Do you mind picking me up in front of school? I told my mom I was going to the dance Friday night."

"No problem," Noel said.

Henry and Gavin pushed their seats back and stood. "See you ladies later."

"Have fun in history," Noel said. She, Henry, and Gavin began laughing.

"I hope I didn't scare them away," I said after they'd gone.

Noel shook her head. "Nah, they have a presentation to give about the Civil War. Gavin has the visual aids in his car…artifacts from his

‘grandfather.’”

I sighed. “School must be such a breeze for those guys.”

Noel shrugged.

“What’s up with you and Gavin, anyway?” I asked. “Is he ever going to ask you out or are you friends with biting benefits?” I bit into my sandwich and chewed.

Noel’s face colored. “Gavin and I are friends. Besides, I haven’t been assigned a vampire.”

I stopped chewing. “Assigned a vampire?”

Noel frowned. “Never mind.”

“Noel, what are you talking about?”

Noel shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. Anyway, now that we’re alone I have something to tell you about Fane.”

Oh, she was devious changing the subject like that. I planted both arms on the table and leaned in.

“I wasn’t sure if I should tell you this, but Whitney doesn’t think he’s with Valerie anymore.”

Whitney was one of Noel’s old friends from Denali High and had been one of mine briefly between my car accident and transfer to West. A short friendship. But she had called me to report seeing Fane and Valerie lip-locked right after Valerie blackmailed me into breaking up with Fane.

I didn’t know which one of them I had been angrier at. Valerie for threatening me or Fane for moving on the moment I ended our relationship.

“Well, Whitney should get her facts straight,” I said. “She told me they were back together.”

“Cause they were,” Noel said. “For a day.”

Why would Valerie go to the trouble of pulling Fane and I apart only to hook up with him for one day?

Maybe Fane had realized his error and dumped her a second time. Lovely thought. One that would take some of the edge off St. Vomit’s Day. At this point, even the possibility that Valerie and Fane were history was enough for me.

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5
Suck Buddy

I made it through the week without having to deal with Mike. On Friday morning there were no more seats beside me when Mike arrived in history class. I could sense him hustling to follow me out at the end of the period. Just as I felt him closing in, a girl called out, "Mike, wait up!"

His footsteps slowed, mine hastened, and I was in the clear. Hopefully Pretty Voice, whoever she was, asked Mike to the dance.

Special thanks went out to Mom for not keeping me lingering in front of school. That afternoon I saw her waiting in the pick-up lane when I walked out. Ever since I'd mentioned moving out, she'd been either on time or early.

Five hours later the sky had drained of color and we were back at school. I felt bad making Mom drive out here three times in one day, but she wasn't exactly Noel's biggest fan. She'd ask less questions if she thought I was going to a school dance. Even though she knew about vampires, she needed her illusions, one of which consisted of a daughter who did normal things like attend school dances.

That didn't stop her from worrying. "But who do you know here?" she asked, chewing on her lower lip.

"I've met a few people," I said.

"Well, you look beautiful, honey."

"Thank you."

I wore my hair down and had stained my lips in a blood red shade that could hold their own against Valerie's. I wasn't usually big on eye makeup, but tonight I'd outlined my eyes and put on mascara. I pushed my visor back up once I'd double-checked that I had no smudges around my eyes or lips.

"What time should I pick you up?" Mom asked.

"I'll get a ride home. One of the guys I'm meeting mentioned going out for dessert afterwards, if that's okay with you."

Mom's eyes narrowed. "Is this boy nice?"

"Very nice and very boring. All he talks about is college."

"There's nothing wrong with thinking about the future," Mom said quickly.

At least my comment worked in taking the sting out of her voice.

A group of girls in short dresses walked past the car.

"Will you look at that," she said. "Those girls are going to end up catching colds without a coat on. In this weather…" She shook her head.

I'd tried to walk out of the house without a jacket earlier, but Mom insisted I take her full-length coat. It looked too fancy on me, but then again there was no such thing as too fancy or too elegant at the palace.

I leaned over and kissed Mom on the cheek. "Thanks for driving me

over…again."

"Don't worry about that. I'm happy too."

"Don't wait up," I said after I exited the car.

"Don't stay out too late," she countered.

I gave her a little wave then turned and headed for the school's double doors. Knowing her, she'd watch me until I safely entered the building. A guy in a tux held the door open for his date then ushered me in ahead of him.

"Thanks," I said.

The students who had worn coats were hanging them up on the long metal coat racks that had been wheeled into the hallway outside the gym.

I swung around to the farthest set of double doors and peered out the glass into the parking lot. No sign of Mom's car. No sign of Noel, either. I wasn't particularly keen on hanging around the school in case Mike showed up.

I made my way across the parking lot. Cars poured in one after the other as though they were part of a Friday night funeral procession. With any luck, Noel would pull in before I reached the street.

She didn't.

I paced the sidewalk along Hillcrest Drive until I heard a honk.

Noel pulled up alongside the curb, and I got inside her car.

"Sorry!" she said before I even closed the door behind me. "I didn't notice the time."

"Don't worry about it."

I pulled the "Bite Me" heart pendant out of my coat pocket and clasped it around my neck. I hadn't wanted to wear it in front of Mom. She would have wanted to know where it came from, who gave it to me, why, and so on and so forth.

Noel looked over and smiled at me. "I've got mine on, too."

Marcus didn't live too far from West in downtown Anchorage. His condo sat about as close to the inlet as you could get.

I shucked off Mom's coat and tossed it in the backseat of the car.

"You look nice," Noel said, doing the same with her jacket.

"You look good yourself." And she did in her little black dress. I held out my arm. "May I escort you inside?"

Noel grabbed my arm. "You may."

We knocked on the carved wood door with its custom stained glass windows. A young man in a tuxedo ushered us inside.

"No coats, ladies?"

"We left them in the car," I said.

The young man nodded once. "Please make yourselves comfortable and have a magnificent evening."

Noel and I looked at one another. I had to bite my tongue to keep from laughing.

"Thank you," Noel said.

"Joyeux Noel and Aurora Sky!"

It was impossible to miss Marcus in a living room full of black tuxes. He wore a pair of black trousers and a red silk shirt, half unbuttoned. Guests parted as he made his way through the living room to join us.

"Welcome, my black-haired beauties."

Marcus kissed Noel's cheeks and then mine. He eyed our pendants and said, "Very good."

Marcus had the same heart pinned to his shirt.

"Thank you for inviting me," I said.

"But of course." Marcus had a voice as silky as his shirt. I didn't feel particularly comfortable around him, but you couldn't find a more hospitable host.

"You know where the drinks are," he said, sweeping an arm toward the kitchen.

"Thank you," Noel and I said in unison.

Marcus stepped in the way before I could follow Noel. He leaned forward, lips curving. "Try not to behave."

I shivered involuntarily and Marcus chuckled before rejoining the guests inside his living room.

A young man dressed like the guy at the front door walked out of the kitchen with a tray of drinks as I walked in. At least Noel and I had the space to ourselves. I looked around the counters. Last time there had been a champagne fountain.

My eyes landed on a silver tray lined with shot glasses and filled with thick, red liquid.

My eyes widened. "Is that…"

"Blood," Noel said.

I opened my mouth to speak, but she cut me off. "Don't worry, it comes from the blood bank. There's wine in the fridge or champagne if you prefer."

"I think Aurora would prefer the blood."

Goosebumps rose over my flesh at the sound of Fane's voice. I turned slowly. I couldn't stop myself from staring once I saw him. Fane wasn't cute in the conventional sense. A lot of girls would probably cross the road to avoid passing him on the street, but they didn't know the way he kissed. The way his lips teased me until I was breathless. If he kissed that good I couldn't begin to imagine him in bed. Actually, I could. And therein lay the problem.

"Hello, Fane," I said cordially.

Noel looked between us then asked, "Have you seen Gavin?"

"He's in the living room," Fane said, not taking his eyes off me.

"Cool," Noel said. "See you soon?"

And then she left me. Alone. With Fane.

His grin widened as Noel passed him on her way out of the kitchen.

"Alone at last," he said, inching closer. "Don't look so scared, Aurora. I'm the one who should be afraid." Before I knew it, he was at my side.

"Hunter," he whispered inside my ear.

I took a step away from him. "I'm just here to have a good time, like everyone else."

"I'll drink to that." Fane grabbed two shot glasses off the tray and handed one to me.

Without thinking, I grabbed the shot then scowled. "I don't drink blood."

Fane gave me a dubious look then tossed back his blood shot and set it on the counter with a clack. "Yes, you do," he said, running a tongue across his lip.

I set the shot beside his empty one and glared. Now that he was closer I could smell cigarette smoke on him. He'd quit once for me. Back when we were together. Back when I thought he was human.

"Thanks for returning my scarf."

"You're not wearing it," Fane said. He pushed my hair over my shoulders then sucked in a breath when he saw the bite marks on my neck.

Henry chose that moment to enter the kitchen.

"Geez, Fane! Get carried away?"

Fane's back was to Henry, so the other vampire didn't see Fane scowl. His expression changed almost instantly to one of smug satisfaction.

"You know me, I like the rough stuff."

I felt my cheeks heat when Henry glanced back at me, unsure how to respond. I knew how he felt. I was utterly without words. Unlike Fane. The fiend.

"Speaking of which…Aurora, may I speak to you upstairs?" Fane asked.

"Upstairs?" I repeated. The room expanded as my eyes did.

"Yeah," he said. "I need to *talk* to you in private."

I nodded, once more speechless. My heart beat erratically as I followed Fane out of the kitchen.

"Hey," Henry called.

When we turned around Henry held out two shots of blood to Fane.

"Why don't you take a couple of these, Fane? Go easy on her."

Fane's upper lip, which was smaller than the lower one, curled when he smiled. "Thanks, bro," he said. He downed the first shot in one gulp then lifted the second one in the air. "One for the road."

With Fane's free hand he slipped his fingers over my arm and steered me through the living room to the spiral staircase.

"What are you doing?" I whispered frantically.

Fane looked around the room. "Have to keep up appearances, don't we?" he responded testily.

Fane knew that if we didn't keep up the act of being together then eventually one of the vampires at these parties would want to bite me, and if they bit me, the gig was up. At least Fane didn't want me dead. How romantic.

I nodded mutely and followed him up the custom iron and wood spiral

staircase leading to Marcus's many private guestrooms upstairs. Fane walked down the hall into the October room—a spacious quarter painted in various shades of orange. He pulled the silver bat dangling from the doorknob inside the room and moved it to the outer knob—Marcus's clever "do not disturb" signal.

He didn't bother turning on the overhead light. Candles blazed from all corners of the room. It smelled like orange peel and clove.

Once he'd shut the door, Fane held up the shot of blood. "Still going to pretend you don't want this?"

"I don't want it."

Fane shrugged, but rather than down it he set it beside an orange pillar candle on the dresser. The blood flickered in the light.

"We're alone now," I said impatiently to mask my jangled nerves. "What did you want to talk to me about?"

"Who said anything about talking?" Fane walked over to the bed.

My breath caught in my throat as he ran a hand along the quilt while skirting the length of the bed to the headboard.

I swear every move he made was a deliberate attempt to unnerve me.

I expected Fane to sit on the bed, but he rested his back against the wall and folded his arms. "You have a lie to maintain, and I have a reputation to uphold."

"Some reputation," I said under my breath.

He smiled. I tried not to stare at his lips too long.

They puckered right before he began speaking. "How's the new school?"

"Same shit, different faces."

Fane leaned forward when he laughed. I felt my body relax as his did as though our minds were somehow hardwired together. "Are you staying out of trouble?"

"I'm West High's model student. Early to class. Front row. Attentive."

Fane nodded. "I'm sure that makes your mother happy."

I shrugged and sat on the edge of the bed. The doorknob settled in my direct line of vision. I'd forgotten how easy it was to talk to him even after the whole vampire/hunter revelation and breakup. Easy didn't exactly equal comfortable. I hadn't yet formulated the words to ask if he and Valerie were together. It's not the kind of thing that flowed naturally into a conversation.

"Have you made any new friends?" Fane asked carefully.

I couldn't tell if that was Fane's roundabout way of asking if I had a boyfriend.

"I don't need friends. I need to graduate." I turned and met his eye. "As long as we're in private maybe you can confirm something for me."

Might as well go for it.

Fane raised a brow. "And what's that?"

"Are you with Valerie?"

I didn't care how it sounded. I had to know.

“The only reason Valerie threw herself back at me was so she could ditch me a day later.” Fane chuckled. “I forgot what a hellcat she is.”

He said the last part a little too fondly for my liking. And I suppose Fane considered me a kitty in comparison. I don’t know why Dante and Fane perceived Valerie as the feisty one. I thought the news would relieve me, but now that I knew, it seemed irrelevant. If Valerie hadn’t dropped him, Fane would still be with her. That’s what mattered.

Fane honed in on my frown and grinned. “Don’t worry, she may have gotten the last word, but I got the last bite.”

“That’s enough,” I said, balling my hands into fists. “We’ve put in our time. Now if you’ll excuse me.” I stormed toward the door.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?”

Against my better judgment, I stopped and followed the direction of Fane’s eyes to the shot of blood on the dresser.

One sip. What harm would it do? I could taste blood, unlike food. Not that blood tasted particularly fantastic. It’s the way it made me feel: my whole body humming to life, radiating warmth, all my senses fully engaged.

Fane took advantage of my hesitation. He fetched the shot and lifted it between me and the door.

“I’m leaving now,” I said.

I couldn’t blame Fane for not taking me seriously when I did nothing to push past him.

His voice dropped. “I know all about the cravings. I know about the unbearable thirst that can only be quenched with blood.” He stepped closer. “I know you think about it all the time, like a lover you can’t get enough of.”

I closed my eyes and shuddered. “Stop,” I rasped.

Fane chuckled softly.

I cracked my eyes open enough to see him throw back the shot, but he didn’t swallow. He leaned forward. Even knowing both the blood and his kiss were off limits, I leaned in. His lips curved up as they closed in on mine.

A knock at the door jolted me back to my senses. My body jerked. Fane swallowed the blood and cursed.

“Aurora?” a voiced said from the other side.

My heart momentarily stopped. It couldn’t be, but even from the few conversations we’d had, I recognized Mike’s voice.

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6
Party Crasher

Fane opened the door halfway, folding his arms across his chest as he leaned against the frame. “Can we help you?”

I tried to regain my composure.

Mike stood in the hallway trying to look over Fane’s shoulder. He smiled when he saw me. “Hey.”

“Apparently you *have* made friends,” Fane said sardonically.

I didn’t respond. I had a bigger problem on my hands. “Mike, what are you doing here?”

Before he could answer, Fane jumped in. “Mike, is it?” I couldn’t see his expression with his back to my face, but there wasn’t anything friendly in his tone. “You see this here ornament on the doorknob?”

Mike glanced down. “Yeah.”

“When the bat’s in flight, we’re getting down tonight—if you know what I mean.”

I pushed past Fane. “That’s not what it means,” I said. “Come on, Mike. We can talk downstairs. Fane, I’ll see you later.”

Fane stretched in the doorframe. “Got some spare Trojans burning a hole inside your pocket?”

I whipped around and scowled at Fane so hard my jaw ached. The only thing burning was my face from rage and humiliation…a lethal combination. I flipped him off right before I grabbed Mike’s arm and steered him down the hall. It took a bit of pulling—he kept staring into open rooms at the statues and other curiosities decorating the palace.

“Sorry, Aurora, I didn’t mean to interrupt anything.”

“There was nothing to interrupt. I was just leaving when you knocked.”

Mike grinned. “Oh? That’s good. Who was that guy?”

“Mike,” I said, stopping at the railing beside the spiral staircase. “What are you doing here? How did you even find this place?”

Mike grinned. “I have a little confession to make. I followed you here.”

“What?”

“I hadn’t planned to,” he said quickly. “I drove to school to meet my buddies at the dance and then I saw you outside. Before I had a chance to park and ask what you were doing, I saw you get into a car with some chick.”

“So you followed me?”

“I remembered you saying you had a party to go to, and it didn’t look like you had a date. I thought if I showed up we might get a chance to hang out.”

Oh, Mike. This was so not the place to hang out. I had to get him out of here immediately.

Mike stared down at the guests mingling in the living room. “This is quite the shindig. Glad I dressed up for the dance.”

“Speaking of the dance, you should get back before your friends worry about you.”

“Nah, I texted them before I came inside.”

If I’d had any color left in my pale skin it would have drained. “Did you text them the address?” I demanded.

“No, I just told them I decided to go to a party instead.”

My shoulders relaxed. “Good, now let’s get you out of here.” I looked back in annoyance when Mike didn’t follow me to the top of the stairs.

“What’s the rush?”

I tightened my fingers around the iron railing. My patience had just about run out.

“The rush is that this party is by invitation only, and you weren’t invited. Now come with me before the host notices you’ve snuck in.”

I scanned the living room for Marcus as I spoke. He couldn’t be hard to locate in his red shirt. As luck would have it, he wasn’t around. Hopefully he’d snuck off in one of the upstairs rooms with their dangling bats.

Mike looked ready to protest until I took his hand and pulled him toward the stairs. He smiled and gave my hand a squeeze.

I led Mike down the spiral staircase. The moment we reached the living room I let go of his hand. Before I could steer Mike out of the living room, he said, “Hey, I know you.”

I tried not to grimace as Henry turned slowly. He looked from Mike to me then back at Mike, saying nothing.

“You go to West,” Mike added.

Oh God, Henry did not look happy, and I couldn’t blame him. I would have clamped my hand over Mike’s mouth if it wouldn’t draw more attention.

“Come on, Mike. The door’s this way.” I gave his arm another pull.

“Aurora’s throwing me out,” Mike said with a laugh. “See you around.”

I felt a surge of relief when I finally managed to get Mike past the kitchen. The front door was in sight.

“Did you bring a coat?” I asked.

Before Mike could answer, we were stopped by a mass of muscle, staring sensually at Mike. Marcus. Perfect timing.

“And who is this delicious treat?”

“No one. He’s leaving.”

Mike reached his hand out. “Hey, man. I’m Mike.”

Marcus’s eyes shined under the track lighting above his head. “Handsome and well mannered—I insist you stay. My name is Marcus.”

“Is this your place?” Mike asked. “I didn’t mean to crash your party.”

“Crash? Don’t be silly,” Marcus said, still holding on to Mike’s hand. “You can crash here anytime. Aurora knows I never turn down objects of beauty.”

Mike's smile faded. He moved closer to me.

I squared my shoulders. "Too bad Mike has another engagement he's late for."

"I'm sure he can cancel," Marcus said, winking at Mike.

Before Mike could answer, I said, "Unfortunately not. He's kept his friends waiting long enough already and like you said, he's too well-mannered to keep them waiting any longer. Mike?" I said sharply. "I'll walk you to your car."

"Maybe another time," Mike said, following close behind me.

"Anytime." Marcus brows jumped, and he turned back toward the living room.

Mike walked out the front door as though in a trance until the cold air hit him.

"Wait, what about my jacket?"

"Forget the jacket. I'll bring it to school on Monday."

"Are you mad at me?" Mike asked.

Now that we were outside, I felt free to talk as loud as I liked.

"Yes, I'm mad at you! You can't just follow me to a party and show up uninvited."

"I know. I'm sorry. I wasn't stalking you or anything. I'd just rather hang out at a party than a school dance. And it would have been cool to hang out. Marcus didn't seem to mind."

I stopped on the sidewalk and leaned into Mike. "You have to promise me you will never come back here." I really needed to find a way to hammer that point home. It's not as though I could warn Mike about vampires. "It's Marcus, you see. He once had a thing for me, and he still gets jealous of other guys. I know he acts friendly, but you can't trust him to have the best intentions."

"Marcus?" Mike asked dubiously.

I nodded, hoping he'd buy it.

Mike watched me carefully. "But you're not into him?"

My expression was proof enough—my entire face wrinkled. "I've never been into him that way."

Mike stopped beside an SUV and kicked at a clump of frozen snow on the sidewalk. He kept at it, making no move to the driver's side.

The cold made my gums feel numb. I cleared my throat. "Drive safe, Mike."

Mike stopped kicking at the snow. "So, you're going back inside?"

"Only to get your coat and find my ride. I'm ready to go."

"I'll drive you home," he said.

"I promised my friend we'd hang out afterwards," I said.

"Okay, well, I guess I'll see you Monday."

Unless I found another high school to transfer to. Yeah, right.

"Drive safe."

"See you later, Aurora," Mike said.

I lifted my hand in the air and turned my back to him before he could say anything more, hurrying back to the warmth of the palace.

Henry was waiting for me in the kitchen with a tight frown forming wrinkles on his chin. I eyed the blood shots on the counter beside him. I could really use one. Blood made me feel strong, in control.

"What was Michael Peterson doing here?" Henry demanded.

My brain had a whiteout moment before registering that Henry was referring to Mike.

"I didn't invite him," I said defensively.

"That wasn't my question."

I reached for a bottle of red wine on the counter. If I couldn't drink blood in public then I was going for the next best thing. Red wine had its own warming quality, especially in winter.

"Allow me," Henry said, ever the gentleman even though displeasure filled every crevice of his face.

"He followed me here," I said as Henry poured.

"You seem to have a knack for drawing unwelcome attention," Henry said, eyes never leaving the flow of wine. He lifted the bottle when the glass was half full and handed it to me.

I didn't feel like drinking anymore. It's not as though I could argue with him—as much as I wanted to. It had been nice of him and Gavin to help dispose of my captors two weeks ago. Now here I was leading a clueless classmate straight into the bat cave. If I didn't watch myself I'd be banned from the palace.

"What does he know about us?" Henry asked, watching me with a stony expression.

"Nothing."

"But he knows where to find us."

"This isn't his scene," I said quickly. "He came looking for me."

"What's to stop him from looking again?"

"I told him not to." Sheesh, what was with the third degree?

Henry narrowed his eyes. "Where's Fane?"

"Upstairs."

"He left you unchaperoned?"

A gagging noise gurgled in the back of my throat before I could speak. "This is the twenty-first century, Henry. I don't require a chaperone."

Henry looked me up and down. "That's debatable."

"Well, he wanted me to fetch him another drink. How does that sound?" Henry probably had no problem seeing me as a serving wench. Who knew how old, or more importantly, *old-fashioned,* he was. I nearly knocked over my wine glass reaching for a shot of blood. Having a vampire watch my every move was unnerving. Wine in one hand, shot in the other, I marched out of the kitchen without a second glance.

Marcus shot me a wicked grin as I made my way through the living room to the spiral staircase. Upstairs, the door to the October room remained open, but there wasn't any sign of Fane. I didn't know what I'd been expecting, and I didn't know where he'd gone. I hadn't seen him in the living room, and he couldn't have left without running into me. Not through the front door, anyway.

I glanced at the window. Doubtful.

I tried to convince myself that the only reason I felt disappointed was he'd gotten away with only the finger for that Trojan remark. What did Fane think? Because I'd fucked up once I'd do it again?

I took a quick glance around then downed the shot of blood. One gulp. I felt shaken, and I needed something to calm me.

Calm wasn't exactly the right word. The blood excited me. I felt like I'd taken a hit of adrenaline. I wanted to dance. Why didn't Marcus have dancing at his parties? Everyone stood around yapping and sipping cocktails. What a bunch of old fogies. Literally.

I took a large sip of wine to wash down any trace of blood on my teeth.

I felt like walking home but I wasn't dressed for it and I wasn't about to disappear on Noel again.

Where was Noel, anyway? Probably shut off in a room with Gavin. I hadn't seen him in the living room when I passed through.

Guess there wasn't much else to do besides sip my wine in a corner downstairs and not talk to strangers. As I retreated down the hall, I found a tray with empty glasses and stashed the shot glass there before descending into the living room. Noel sat in a corner by the window staring out at the dark inlet. Her frown reflected in the glass.

"Noel?" I said, taking a seat on a cushy chair beside her. Marcus and his partner, Richard Stanton of Stanton's Fine Art Gallery, kept the rooms filled with so many antiques and art objects that there wasn't much legroom. My knees bumped into Noel's legs.

"Oh, hi." She sighed.

"What's the matter?"

"I don't know what's going on. Gavin is being so cold to me tonight."

I raised a brow. "He's a vampire."

"Ha, ha," Noel replied. "What about Fane? Is it true he broke up with Valerie?"

"He says they were only together a day." I slumped forward. "He was rather cold, too."

Noel sighed. "Why can't we like normal guys?"

"Because we're not normal girls." I followed Noel's gaze to the window. From that vantage there were no city lights, no buildings, no land. Just ocean.

During the day, Cook Inlet looked about as gray as the overcast sky. At night it was as black as oil. Anchorage didn't have beaches. We had mudflats. The fine glacial silt turned to quicksand any time an unwary victim ventured

too far and became stuck in the mud. Last summer, the Anchorage Fire Department had to rescue two teenagers who got stuck before the tide swallowed them whole.

"Ready to get out of here?" I asked Noel.

"Sure."

All I wanted to do was collapse into bed, but as Noel's Volvo chugged up the hill, I saw my entire house lit up from within as though it were radioactive.

"That's odd," I said, when we pulled up.

"Is everything okay?" Noel asked.

"I don't know. Guess I'll find out."

The moment I walked in I heard the kind of sobbing that could only mean one thing. Someone had died. And that someone could only be my dad.

"Mom?"

My heart constricted, and I fought for breath. My vision swam. I tried to think back to my last memory of Dad—his last words. What I remembered was Mom begging him not to leave. Great last memory to take with me the rest of my life.

I found Mom in the kitchen, plates broken at her feet. She'd stopped sobbing as soon as I called out her name, but her face was a red blotchy horror.

"Aurora, I wasn't expecting you home this early," she said in a voice that was freakishly normal.

She'd lost it all right.

"It's Dad, isn't it?"

Mom's eyes confirmed that it was.

"Oh, God." Without warning, I collapsed against the counter and made a choking sound. "I was such a snot the last time I saw him. And now…" I started sobbing uncontrollably.

Dad hadn't been especially nice after my accident, but in his defense, he'd been out of the country and had no idea how close I'd come to dying or of the deal Mom had made with the agents.

It came back to me then, his last words. *"I'm not sure I like this new attitude of yours."* I sobbed harder. If only he'd known what really happened. I couldn't imagine him sitting idly by, allowing a secret government agency to dictate the rest of my life. He would have fought for me.

"My poor girl," Mom said, taking me into her arms. She stroked my back as I cried into her bathrobe.

I leaned back and looked her in the eyes. "How did it happen?"

Her hand stilled on my back and her lips pinched the way they did whenever she didn't want to talk about something. "I don't want to worry you with it," she said.

"That bad?" I asked, barely above a whisper.

I took her hand in mine and squeezed gently. "Mom, I have to know."

Please don't let it be a vampire or a car accident. The truth couldn't be as gruesome as what my brain was throwing at me.

Mom sighed. She pulled her hand out of mine and went to the far side of the dining room, coming to a rest in front of a stack of papers. She took a deep breath. Her eyes didn't seem capable of meeting mine.

"He's been having an affair for two years," she started.

"Affair?!" My jaw went slack.

She met my eyes now and squinted as though trying to read the expression on my face. "I didn't want to shock you with this. We don't have to talk about it."

"Mom, I thought Dad was dead!"

"Dead?" she repeated. "No, your father wants a divorce." She visibly shuddered as though divorce was worse than death. "He had the papers delivered earlier this evening." She looked down.

I stormed to the table, raking my eyes over the stack.

"That dick!"

I could say that now that I knew he was alive and dicking around with another woman. His long absences suddenly made sense.

"I'll clean up the kitchen," I said, wanting to distract myself with something.

"Don't worry about that," she said.

I got out the dustpan and broom anyway, and began sweeping up the broken bits of plate.

"What does this mean?" I asked, crouched on the floor. "Do we have to move out of the house?"

"We're not going anywhere," Mom said in a voice that brokered no argument.

She was understandably angry. I should have left it at that, but I didn't.

"Maybe this would be a good time to sell the house. I plan on moving into an apartment after I graduate. This is an awfully big house for one person. You could spend time with Grandma." Like many retired Alaskans, Gran divided her time between Alaska and Florida. I swept the last of the pieces of broken plate into the dustpan and stood up.

Mom had been deathly silent as I spoke. When I ventured a glance her way she looked ready to snarl. "I am not running off to hide in Florida. If Bill thinks he can run me out of the state and out of my home, he has another thing coming!"

"Okay, Mom. Calm down. What do you want to do?"

She took the kind of breath that lifted her shoulders halfway to her ears and released. "I want Bill to come home. We could work this out if only he'd try."

"You…want him…back?" I couldn't believe my ears.

"Spare me your judgment, Aurora."

Now I really didn't believe my ears. Mom never said stuff like that to me.

“I’m not judging,” I said defensively. “But he cheated on you—for two years!”

“And we’ve been together for twenty. You don’t just walk away from something like that. He’s going through a phase is all. How much do you want to bet that woman put him up to this? Of course she did. Bill has a wife, a daughter, a home. He wouldn’t just walk away from that.”

I doubt Mom was in the right frame of mind to be reminded that he had walked away from all that. He wasn’t coming back. She might not be able to see that, but I did.

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7
Mystery Man

I didn't take my usual seat up front in history on Monday. I chose a desk with seats occupied on either side. I wasn't in the mood for Mike's antics. Not today. Not tomorrow. Not ever.

I really needed to put on my big girl panties and lay down the law. If I could fight vampires, I could let a boy down gently.

First I had to return his jacket.

I gave silent thanks when the final bell rang with no sign of Mike.

Homework was the furthest thing from my mind when lunch rolled around. Maybe I could convince Noel to leave the love nest and go out for a bite. I needed to tell someone about my dad.

I took my wallet out of my backpack before stuffing the bag inside my locker. Hopefully Noel would let me steal her away.

I made tracks for the cafeteria. If we left within the next five minutes we might still have time to order our food at one of the nearby fast food chains and eat it.

A giggling freshman collided into me while joking around with a friend. I nearly pushed him aside.

"Sorry," he said quickly.

I took a breath. *Be nice, Aurora.* "That's okay."

Four girls sat around Henry and Gavin today—none of whom were Noel. Henry watched me wearily. Probably still bent out of shape after being IDed at the palace by Mike.

"Where's Noel?" I asked.

Henry lifted his chin. "Library."

"Thanks." I turned abruptly and walked out.

I found Noel slouched over a table top in a back corner of the library. My lips lifted as I approached her. When she sat up I noticed her hair. She'd cut it short! Although Noel and I looked nothing alike, we'd had almost identical long black hair and bangs. Now it barely reached her shoulder blades. Like Valerie, Noel had a way of wearing red lipstick as though it were a natural eye color. She looked good without the hoodie and with her hair styled in an attractive bob.

"I love your hair," I said immediately.

Noel didn't so much as crack a smile. "Thanks."

"What are you doing in the library? Get hit by a case of nostalgia?" Noel and her friends Whitney and Hope used to hang out in the school library at Denali High all the time.

"What's the matter?" I asked when she didn't respond.

"Valerie," Noel said, anger rising in her voice.

I slipped into the seat beside her. “No argument there. What’s the vixen done now?”

Noel glared at the tabletop. “She hooked up with Gavin.”

“When? How?” I sputtered. “They don’t even go to the same school.” And just when Noel had gone and gotten a makeover. What rotten timing. Or maybe this was Noel’s way of showing Gavin what he was missing.

“After I dropped you off Friday night I went back to the party and there they were making out on the couch.” Noel’s lip curled back. “One of Marcus’s guests told them to take it upstairs…and they did.”

Noel’s head dove forward into her arms.

“I’m so sorry, Noel.” I patted her back gently. Maybe not the best time to bring up my philandering father.

“Want to grab a sandwich with me?”

“I’m not hungry, but I’ll come with you. I just want to get out of here.” She pushed away from the table.

As we headed down the hall, the intercom crackled.

“Aurora Sky and Noel Harper, please report to the front office immediately.”

Noel and I looked at each other. I imagine I looked every bit as alarmed as she did. My hands instantly balled into fists. Noel and I headed to the office without a word. I didn’t know about Noel, but I could do without any more surprises.

Noel stepped up to the front desk. “I’m Noel Harper and this is Aurora Sky.”

The secretary handed us each a slip of paper. “You’ve been excused from your afternoon classes,” she said.

Noel and I huddled together with our matching notes.

I need you on base now. – Melcher

“So much for taking the rest of the month off,” I muttered.

“Duty calls,” Noel said, sounding pretty sarcastic herself. “Do you need anything out of your locker?”

“Yeah, can I grab my books? I have a history test to study for tonight.”

“Meet you out front,” Noel said.

My phone rang on the way to my locker. It was Dante.

“Have you been called in?” he asked.

“Yep.”

“Need a ride?”

“I’m coming in with Noel.”

“I’ll save you a seat,” he said, abruptly ending the call.

“It’s not a race,” I muttered under my breath.

I certainly wasn’t in any hurry to get on base.

It took me a moment to remember my new locker combo. Once I had the

door unlatched I sifted through my pack, leaving behind the textbooks I knew I wouldn't touch that night. I eyed Mike's coat in the back of my locker—one more thing that needed taking care of.

I dialed my mom as I walked down the hall and told her the agents had called me in, and I'd catch a ride home with Dante. For once she didn't ask if everything was okay. Probably too hung up on her own problems.

Noel had her car idling in the pick-up lane when I walked out. She had the black hoodie back on with the hood pulled over her head. I'd grabbed my red scarf that morning and wrapped it around my neck. Old habits die hard.

"Valerie is the absolute last person I feel like seeing right now," Noel grumbled after I got in.

"Sorry."

"Melcher better not try to pair her up with me."

"Nor me. Once was enough." I scrunched up my face. "How did you and Dante get along, by the way?"

"Fine, even though he would have rather been with you or Valerie."

Now she was really pouting.

I kept my eyes on the road because Noel looked spaced out. At least we were driving on snow, not ice.

Noel and I didn't speak the rest of the way. My thoughts drifted back to the divorce. I wished I could tell Fane about my dad. Could we ever be friends again?

I handed my ID badge to Noel at the gated checkpoint leading on base. The military man at the window took both badges with his standard frown then handed them back.

"About time," Dante said when Noel and I walked into Melcher and Crist's office.

I rolled my eyes before taking a seat. "I'm surprised the agents left you alone in their office."

Dante leaned against the wall and grinned. "I tried to get into the file cabinets, but they're locked."

Noel fell into a chair and pulled her hood further down her face.

Dante's eyes flicked from Noel to me. "How's school?"

"School."

"Really? Tell me more."

I started to chuckle when Valerie strode in, tall brown boots pulled over skinny jeans, a fire engine red cowl-necked sweater on top. She sighed dramatically.

"Don't tell me I've been called in to babysit Aurora again."

"Good thing you came," Dante said smoothly. "A call girl's gone missing, and Melcher needs you to work through her clients until you find the culprit."

I laughed then choked trying to hold it back.

Valerie chose to direct her anger at me. "Something funny?" she

demanded, leaning toward me.

Dante tsked. "Careful, Red. I've seen Aurora in action."

"So have I. By action, I assume you mean getting her ass whipped."

Dante grinned. "You have my attention now."

I pushed myself out of my chair, prepared to yell at them both when Melcher walked into the room.

"Oh good, you're all here."

I hardly noticed the man who walked in behind Melcher. He pushed the door closed forcefully, hanging at the back as though guarding our only exit. Melcher stood behind his desk.

"Team, I have bad news."

Since when did Melcher ever call us in to share good news? Something was definitely up, though. For the first time he wasn't smiling. He looked us each in the face. "Agent Crist was found dead over the weekend."

"What?"

I'm not sure who said it—maybe all four of us. Noel's head shot up. Dante lowered his foot to the ground. Valerie's jaw dropped.

Melcher nodded grimly before taking a seat. "One of our own…gone."

Crist and I were never close, but I never wished her ill—and certainly not dead.

Melcher cleared his throat. "Agent Crist served her country well, and while the community might not know it, her sacrifice will never be forgotten. Not in our unit. She put duty before her personal life. Honor before pride. Loyalty above self-interest."

I slouched in my seat. At least Melcher's rambling served the purpose of numbing my initial shock, though I was waiting like everyone else to find out exactly what had happened.

"Agent Crist worked tirelessly by my side for over three years. She understood our mission better than anyone I've ever worked with."

The guy behind me yawned.

As much as I wanted to turn in my seat and get a better look at him, it didn't feel appropriate with Melcher talking about the former Agent Crist.

"Did a vamp get her?" Dante demanded the minute Melcher concluded his tribute to Crist.

"I'm afraid so." Melcher's speech had loosened his lips, relaxing his frown into something more Melcher-like.

"Do you think he, or whoever, was aware of her involvement in this organization?" I asked.

That's what had gotten me into trouble with Renard and his cronies. What if Crist had talked? Shared names? I gripped the armrests of my seat.

"From what the autopsy showed it appears this was a rush job. We believe Crist was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time."

What were the odds of that happening? I actually felt sorry for the poor woman no matter how prickly she'd been. No one deserved death by vampire,

especially not someone who'd dedicated her life to stopping the creatures from harming human citizens.

Dante smacked his fist against his hand. "Any leads?"

Melcher glanced over our shoulders to the man in back. Mr. Mysterious made his way to the front, taking a seat on the edge of Crist's desk.

"That is what Jared is here to help us with," Melcher said in answer to Dante's question.

"Agent?" Dante asked, raising a brow.

"Just Jared," the man said.

I thought Melcher was smug. This guy exuded conceit. He looked around the room as though he owned the space and everyone in it. His chest looked rock solid under a thin ribbed t-shirt with long sleeves. He didn't wear a suit like Melcher, and he couldn't be much older than thirty, though he held himself up like some kind of Fortune 500 CEO.

Melcher cleared his throat. "Jared is our top recruiter. He's taking time out to help us find Agent Crist's killer."

"Where do we start?" Dante asked, looking between Melcher and "Just Jared."

"We found another body besides Crist," Melcher said. "We believe the second body will lead us to the culprit."

"Who was it?" Dante asked.

Melcher formed a steeple with his fingers and looked directly at me. "It was a boy named Michael Peterson. He went to West High School."

For one glorious second I didn't recognize the name. Then I stopped breathing. It wasn't until Melcher's gaze turned to Noel that I was able to get oxygen to my brain.

Mike!

How was that even possible? Melcher must be mistaken. There was absolutely no link between Mike and Crist—no reason for their lives, and deaths, to collide. Mike couldn't be dead. I had his coat. I still needed to return it.

"Aurora, did you know this boy?" Melcher asked, studying me carefully.

I could see a question forming on Dante's lips. Both men stared at me. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Jared stifle a yawn. I knew in our line of work we had to desensitize ourselves to a certain degree, but he didn't have to act so bored by the death of an agent and a high school boy.

"We both did," Noel spoke up. "He followed us to Marcus's party Friday night. The moment Aurora noticed him at the party she escorted him out to his car. That's the last we saw of him."

I felt torn between awe and appreciation at Noel's succinct account of Mike's appearance Friday night, and a pain of betrayal that she'd reported my after-hours activities. Well, what could I expect from an informant?

"Marcus," Jared said, grinning. He snapped up the name like a grizzly grabbing a salmon mid-jump.

Melcher shook his head. “He doesn’t like to get his clothes wrinkled, let alone his hands bloody.”

Jared smirked. “He’s not the only one.”

“It’s not Marcus,” Melcher reiterated, sitting up in his chair. “He wants to draw as little attention to himself as possible.”

How did Melcher know so much about Marcus? My head started spinning. At least the attention wasn’t on me…whoops, spoke too soon.

Melcher had his eyes on me. “You were at Marcus’s?”

My mouth hung open.

“We’ve been seen together at West so the guys inquired about her and extended an invitation,” Noel said.

Melcher thought this over then nodded. “And what was the other boy doing there?”

“He saw Aurora getting into my car Friday night and followed us. I think he had a crush on her.”

Now my mouth really dropped. I didn’t mind Noel speaking for me at first, but I was starting to now.

Dante whistled. “Heart. Breaker,” he said, beating a fist against his chest.

I glared so hard I swear I strained my eyeballs.

“I didn’t even know the boy! We had like one conversation. Maybe two.”

“Two too many.” I heard Valerie say under her breath.

Maybe she’d like a shiner to match the one she got the week before.

“Who all was at this party?” Melcher asked.

His question was directed at Noel, so I sat back. If she wanted to do the talking then, fine, she could be the one to out everyone in Marcus’s inner circle. As soon as they let us out of here, I was warning Fane. I didn’t think Noel would have been the vindictive type when it came to Gavin hooking up with Valerie, but then you never really knew a person until a boy ended up dead.

Melcher had a notepad out. He picked up a pen and looked at Noel.

“Obviously, Marcus was there,” Noel began.

She began reciting names. I couldn’t imagine how she’d become familiar with so many. Someone knew how to do her job.

As the list continued, my fists tightened, my fingernails leaving crescent indents in the palms of my hands.

Noel stopped speaking. I didn’t look at her for fear of attracting attention, but now that she’d finished, I noticed she’d left out Gavin, Henry, and Fane from the guest list. I loosened my fists. I shouldn’t have doubted her.

Valerie didn’t pipe up, either. Maybe she really did want to protect her suck buddies.

“And that’s everyone?” Melcher asked.

“Everyone I can think of,” Noel replied without hesitation. “If I think of anyone else, I’ll let you know.”

“Very well,” Melcher said. “I need you all to wait in the hall while Jared

and I talk. We'll call you back to deliver your instructions so don't wander far."

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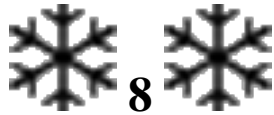

8
Partners

The four of us filed out in silence.

Valerie began texting the moment we walked out. She leaned against a corner at the far end of the hall.

"I had no choice," Noel whispered.

"I know," I said.

There wasn't time to say anything more. Dante slipped in between us. "Poor Agent Crist, who would have dreamed?"

I nodded solemnly. "It's horrific. And Mike." I had to stop talking. My throat constricted.

I felt like such a wretch—always bellyaching about not leaving the state for college. At least I got to go to college. Mike wasn't going anywhere anymore. No bucking bronco at Boise State. I tried to swallow the lump in my throat.

Dante put an arm around me and Noel. I thought he'd say some words of condolence or support. I should have known better. "What's with this party I wasn't invited to?"

I pressed my shoulder against my ear. Dante's breath tickled against my neck.

"You wouldn't last five minutes with Marcus," Noel said.

Dante chuckled. "So he's a biter, is he?"

I rolled my eyes. "Only when it comes to hot younger men."

Dante leaned into me. "You just admitted you think I'm hot."

"Did I?" I raised a brow.

Dante nodded slowly, staring me straight in the eyes. "Can't take it back now."

"I can't believe you two, flirting when Agent Crist's killer is on the loose."

I gave a little jump when Valerie appeared behind us. "We're not flirting!" And don't tell me she hadn't been off texting with Gavin.

"Speak for yourself, Sky," Dante said and winked.

Valerie made a sound of disgust. She folded her arms beneath her bosom, pushing up both breasts, and tapped her foot. "Do they plan on keeping us here all afternoon?"

I took a breath. "Val, it's been like three minutes."

Valerie stopped tapping and glared at me. "Don't call me Val. Only my close friends have permission to call me Val."

"Whatever," I said, throwing up my hands before I walked away.

Noel quickly followed me.

"That time of the month?" Dante asked Valerie before joining us.

Dante put an arm around me. I didn't want him to, but I couldn't exactly shrug him off when he'd dissed Valerie on my behalf.

"That one's wound tight," Dante remarked, massaging my shoulders.

Noel watched Dante's hands at work on my back. When she met my eye I gave her what I hoped was a "we're just friends" look.

Noel's lips twisted. "I'll be right back."

Maybe she misread me and thought I wanted some privacy.

I pulled out of Dante's arms as Noel disappeared around the corner. I faced Dante with my arms folded *over* my chest. He shot me a lopsided grin.

"Feel better?"

"A little." Not even close.

Dante leaned into me. "Listen," he said, glancing to the side then back. "As soon as I arrived I had a chat with Melcher."

"Oh?" Now what?

"I requested he pair us up again. We work well together."

I nearly laughed. My arms actually dropped.

"Dante, we don't work together at all. You left me alone with two vamps in Fairbanks…during my *first* mission. You weren't even in town when Renard and his henchmen abducted me."

Dante listened to all this with the kind of expression that indicates a guy isn't listening at all but rather rewriting everything you say inside his head to fit his version of the facts. "What about when we went back to interrogate the boy? We got him into the cabin together. You tied him up. You even handed me the knife when it came time to interrogate the subject."

I shuddered. This wasn't exactly something I wanted to remember. Great teamwork—torturing and killing a human.

Dante took me by both shoulders and dipped down to look me in the eyes. "What's the matter, Sky?"

I shook my head. "I still can't believe they're dead—Agent Crist and Mike."

"Did you like this boy?"

My lower lip threatened to tremble. "No. That's just the thing. I thought he was annoying. I was relieved he wasn't at school today, and that makes me feel a thousand times worse."

"Hey." Dante squeezed my shoulders gently. "There's nothing wrong with being honest."

A phone rang behind us. The secretary informed us that we could go back inside Melcher's office. I looked over my shoulder and saw Noel reappear from around the corner.

Valerie walked in front of Noel and took her former seat.

Noel stumbled on the way, quickly righted herself, and went for the next available chair. Dante took his usual stance against the wall. He looked from me to the spot beside him. I joined him. Better than sitting beside Valerie.

"All right everyone, let's get down to business," Melcher said.

He and Jared were in the same positions we'd left them in: Melcher at his desk, Jared on top of Crist's.

"Two of the guests at this party have left town. We'll start with them."

Jared slipped off the edge of Crist's desk in one fluid motion and stood. "Listen up, rookies. We're splitting into two teams."

It was almost worth being called a rookie to see the scowl on Valerie's lips.

Almost.

"Ginger and Raven, you're with me."

Should have known I'd get paired with the vixen and Commando.

"We have names, you know," Valerie retorted.

"Not on mission, you don't," Jared said. "You two," he said louder, looking between Dante and Noel. "Moose and Mouse. You're a team."

I snorted. "You're kidding."

"No, I'm not."

I swear I saw Jared grin at me. In a flash it disappeared.

"We have a person of interest in Sitka and one in Fairbanks." Jared set a quarter with a *click* on Crist's desk. He slid it across the surface then scooped it up off the edge. He looked directly at Dante. "Heads you go north. Tails, south."

Dante grinned. This was the sort of game he liked to play.

Jared used his thumb to flick the quarter in the air. We all leaned forward.

Heads, heads, heads, I chanted in my own head. I'd sooner go to Siberia than back to Fairbanks.

Jared caught the quarter mid-air and slapped it on his arm. "Heads," he announced.

I actually smiled and let out a breath. It was pretty funny seeing as there wasn't anything to be relieved about. I still had to leave town on mission with "Ginger" and Jared.

I met Jared's eye. "What do we call you on mission?"

"Just Jared."

Naturally.

"Why do you get to keep your name?" Valerie asked, her lips forming a pout.

"Because I'm in charge on mission."

"It's settled," Melcher said. "I'll book three seats on Alaska Airlines leaving tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" My jaw dropped. "What about school?"

"Sorry, Aurora. This takes precedence."

I might have left it at that, Lord knows I didn't want an audience, but my stomach had twisted into angry knots and something inside me snapped. "You're kidding! I can't go to an out of state college, and now I can't even finish high school?"

I hated Melcher's nonchalant attitude. I hated the lack of concern in his smug expression.

"You'll get your degree, Aurora. If you get too far behind this semester I can always arrange correspondence. Just hang in there another few months. Here." He handed me a slip of paper.

"What's this?" I asked after taking the paper from him.

"A doctor's note. Have your mother deliver it to your school."

Something awful and ugly twisted in my gut. I didn't bother checking my latest malady before crumpling the note into a wad. I squeezed the crumpled paper one last time then let it fall to the ground.

"What's the point?" I turned on my heel and stormed out of the room.

The secretary frowned at me as I walked by. Usually I smiled at her no matter how unfriendly she acted. Not now.

I hurried down the hallway past closed doors and bland walls. My vision swam with unshed tears.

"Aurora, wait up!" I heard Dante call behind me.

I turned around, startled to see him looking very serious. He squeezed the claw at his chest and pulled it over his head. Dante held the cord out to me. "Take it for luck."

"You're giving me your claw?"

Dante grinned. "I'm loaning it to you. Just watch yourself, Sky. I have a funny feeling about all this."

Great, Dante had a funny feeling. He usually lived for this stuff.

Dante fished his car keys out of his pocket. "Here, wait in the Jeep if you want. Melcher and the new general want to brief Noel and I. Shouldn't take long."

I thanked Dante and headed out into the cold. I retrieved my backpack from Noel's car and tossed it inside Dante's Jeep. I turned the key in the ignition and turned the heaters up full blast. While I waited for Dante, I turned the bear claw over in my hand. Poor beast. Hopefully this one had lived to a ripe old age and died of natural causes before having his claw stripped from his carcass. Well, I needed all the luck I could get. I slipped the cord around my head.

There was nothing to see outside the windshield besides parked cars and Melcher's base of operation. It looked about as welcoming as an army barrack. I never thought I'd be summoned back so soon. I tightened my fingers into fists, angry with myself for entertaining any ideas of self-pity.

Crist and Mike were dead.

I hated knowing the victims. Worst of all, I hated feeling somehow responsible.

I'd walked Mike to his car. He'd gotten inside. What went wrong?

A vamp must have been waiting in the backseat of his car. Or followed him. Maybe he'd returned to the party. No, I would have seen him from my spot in the living room. I could have sworn his car was gone when Noel and I

left.

What about Fane?

He'd seen Mike and I together, and it hadn't made him happy. Where had he slipped off to?

I didn't even want to think about it. It was ridiculous. Fane wasn't a killer.

What about Henry?

He hadn't liked Mike seeing him at the party and there was the location of the bodies to consider. The Anchorage dump was literally becoming a dumping ground for dead bodies. Fane, Gavin, and Henry had used it before to ditch Renard and his associate after Marcus ripped them apart.

It seemed unlikely he would be so obvious, but then again, he probably didn't plan on the bodies being discovered. Not to mention he had no clue I was part of a secret government organization specializing in vampire activity.

I was deep in thought when Dante climbed inside the Jeep. "Feels like a sauna in here," he said. He switched the heat off completely.

"Feels nice."

"Good thing you're headed south."

Sure, into the wet cold. Anchorage was so dry that if you dressed right you'd be fine. Southeast Alaska with its damp winters chilled a person right down to their bones.

Dante pulled out of the parking lot. It was still light out. Before he could turn on the radio I asked about his briefing.

"They're sending us up to check out some dude who comes into Anchorage every couple months. Noel thinks the whole thing's going to be a bust—says he likes beer better than blood." Dante leaned back in his seat. "Oh well, I'm always up for a road trip."

Dante began tapping the steering wheel. He always did that around these parts. I knew he couldn't wait to get off base and start speeding.

"Melcher has us all on a wild goose chase. I bet the killer is right here in Anchorage," I said. Maybe right under our noses.

"Oh yeah?" Dante said, sounding interested. "Got a suspect in mind?"

"I've got a funny feeling is all." Dante wasn't the only one.

"And you didn't want to share this with Melcher?"

I scrunched up my nose. "Melcher's a freak."

"And we're his little Franken freaks."

I laughed.

Dante smiled sideways at me.

"Did you hear anything about the vamp I've been assigned?" I asked.

"Just a name and origin: Andre Morrel, formerly of French citizenship. The sergeant doesn't seem keen on small talk."

"Yeah, he's a real bundle of joy."

Jared scared me a little, but that meant he'd scare any vampires we ran into as well. Maybe this time I wouldn't get beaten and bruised.

Then again, a quick in and out to Fairbanks with Dante was beginning to sound better. At least I knew the journey would include comedy relief. I wouldn't wish Valerie on Noel, though, especially after she'd sunk her claws into Gavin. Maybe I could get to the bottom of that development as long as I was forced to work alongside the vixen. Maybe Valerie and Gavin had teamed up to take out Agent Crist and Mike. Nah, it was too much to hope for. While Valerie had shown no love for Crist, Mike's death made no sense. None of it made any sense. I still couldn't wrap my brain around the connection. The effort had begun to exhaust my brain.

"Have you ever been to Sitka or Juneau?" I asked Dante, switching topics.

"Sadly, no. Melcher's always sending me north. He knows I have a way with the natives." Dante winked. "I envy you, Sky. You get to take on the capital."

"Not really. I'm only passing through on the way to Sitka."

"Even better. Back in the day Sitka was the capital of Russian America. They called it the "Paris of the Pacific.""

I snorted. "Paris, give me a break."

Dante squeezed my thigh. "Come on, Sky, show a little enthusiasm. This is a chance to see the world, go back in time before The Alaska Purchase. You have the chance to stand outside St. Michael's Cathedral and the old Russian blockhouses. Even better, you get to see Mount Edgecumbe. It looks just like Fuji."

Paris and now Japan. Big stretch.

I only half listened. My concentration had flown out the window when Dante put his hand on my thigh. He had it back on the steering wheel where it belonged a moment later.

"I'm jealous," Dante said.

"Don't be, I'm stuck with Hothead and Strawberry Suck Cake."

A devious smile spread over Dante's lips.

"What?" I demanded.

"Maybe a trip out of town is just what the two of you need to bond."

I gave a rude laugh. "Let me assure you right here, right now, that I will *never* bond with Valerie Ward."

Dante's brows shot up. "Never say never."

"Never."

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9
Mission Southeast

The next morning, I packed my raincoat and hunting knife, secure in its sheath. Melcher hadn't verbally lifted my ban on weapons, but he hadn't prohibited it on this mission, either. I wasn't about to go in unarmed.

Mom didn't seem particularly concerned that I had to leave town. She had one thing on her mind at the moment: the divorce. Not that she'd accepted it. She told Dad she wouldn't sign the papers until he agreed to meet with a marriage counselor.

I kept what I wanted to say to myself. *"He moved on. Shouldn't you?"*

Then again, what did my mom have to move on to? She didn't have a career or many friends. Soon enough, she wouldn't be responsible for me any longer. It was bad enough staying in state for college. I sure as hell wasn't staying home. The apartment search was marked on my mental calendar for the day after graduation. If I graduated.

Dante had brought a fresh doctor's note with him from the meeting.

"Take it," he'd insisted. "The only person you're hurting is yourself by not turning in the note."

He could be annoying but sometimes Dante made perfect sense.

I zipped up my duffel bag then slung it over one shoulder and stopped in front of my mother's bedroom door. I knocked. "Mom? Mom, it's time to go. Mom?"

No answer.

"Mom, do you want me to call a cab?"

"I'll be right out," came her gravelly voice.

I headed downstairs, ate a piece of bread without toasting it, and downed a glass of orange juice. I glanced at the clock on the oven. I really needed to get to the airport.

The stairs creaked with her slow descent. She appeared in the foyer in her slippers and open bathrobe. I took it she wasn't getting dressed before seeing me off.

Mom shuffled to the fridge and pulled out a can of Diet Coke. She got a glass out and plunked a handful of ice cubes from the freezer inside before pouring the soda in the glass.

"Uh, Mom? We need to go."

She nodded and took a sip. She set the glass down and tied her robe closed. "I'm ready."

Mom followed me to the garage, not even bothering to put on shoes. At least the airport wasn't far.

"Is Dante going with you?"

"No, he has to go to Fairbanks. I'm going with another girl and our team

leader." I wasn't sure what to call Jared.

Mom hummed. "Another girl? That's nice. Is she your age? Are you friends?"

"Yes. Yes. And no."

"It might be nice to have a friend who shares the same line of work."

"I have Dante." And Noel, but Mom didn't know that, and it wasn't for me to share.

"I meant a female friend," Mom said.

"Guys make good friends." Better friends…except when they were trying to hit on me.

"Maybe this trip will give you girls a chance to get to know one another better. What's her name?"

"You know I can't give out that information, Mom."

"Oh, right, I forgot."

"Don't worry. You can call her Ginger. That's her codename on this mission. I'm Raven." Raven was a heck of a lot better than Mouse. I couldn't imagine Noel was too thrilled about that, or that she and Dante would stick with those names. Dante liked to use the name Peter, as in Peter Pan, the boy who never aged. I doubted he'd make Noel his Wendy. He reserved that name for me.

Mom pulled into the departures lane in front of Alaska Airlines and put the car in park. I glanced at her slippers. What I wanted to do was lean over, kiss her on the cheek, and get out of the car, but Mom pulled on the handlebar and stepped outside. I hustled around to the trunk and took my duffel from her hands.

"Thanks for dropping me off, Mom."

She nodded, looking me over. "You be safe."

"I will." I gave her a quick hug.

"Call me after you land."

I hoisted my duffel over one shoulder and walked to the curb.

"Let me know as soon you return, and I'll come pick you up."

I lifted my hand. She took a step toward me. Now that I was leaving, she couldn't seem to say goodbye. I would feel more relaxed once she got back inside the car.

"Aurora, I love you."

"I love you, Mom. I'll be home in a couple days." I had no idea when I'd be home. That was part of the job we had to accept. I went where the agents told me for however long it took. I couldn't imagine this mission taking long. It seemed to me like we were shooting in the dark. I guess it made sense to start with the most obvious candidates and make our way down the list from there—though being from out of town didn't strike me as particularly sketchy.

The night before I'd tried to psyche my mind into believing I was headed out on a mini holiday…with two of the last people on the planet I wanted to be stuck with.

"I'll call you when I land," I said again, then turned toward the sliding doors leading into the terminal.

I caught one last glimpse of my mom standing in the drop-off lane in her slippers and robe.

Warm air greeted me as I stepped into the terminal. Valerie came out of nowhere, practically bumping into me as she pulled a small suitcase on wheels behind her.

"What's with your Mom? She looks like she escaped from a mental ward."

"My mom's not a morning person," I said defensively.

Valerie parked her suitcase at the back of the check-in line and put her hands on her hips. "Where's Jared? He has our tickets."

"We might as well wait in line till he gets here."

She tapped her foot as the line inched forward. She wore a fashionable trench coat that stopped above her knees.

My raincoat was the outdoorsy kind. I'd stuffed it inside my duffel bag along with Dante's bear claw in case TSA tried to confiscate it. For the plane trip, I had on my standard jeans and pleather jacket. I'd left the red scarf at home. Last time I wore it on mission I was abducted and nearly killed. Didn't want to jinx myself.

The closer we got to the check-in counter, the faster the line moved. At least I wasn't the only one flustered. Once we were next up, Valerie glanced over her shoulder and huffed. "Don't tell me he got the time wrong."

"Next!" a ticket agent called.

Valerie and I stood in place. Just as I was about to admit defeat and head to the back of the line, Jared gave us both a shove from behind toward the check-in counter.

"Hey!" Valerie said.

"Hey, yourself, Red."

She snorted in disgust. "Really? Is that the best you can come up with?

"Works for me," Jared replied, pushing between us to get to the counter.

"Dipshit," Valerie said under her breath.

"Three to Juneau, final destination Sitka," the clerk said. "I have you all seated together in aisle twenty-three. Will you be checking in any luggage?"

"Three bags," Jared said.

It's not like we could carry all our knives and hazardous materials on board.

"What seats are we in?" Valerie asked as the three of us waited in line at security.

"I'm taking the aisle," Jared said. "You two can flip for the window seat."

Valerie shook her hair over her shoulders. "I'm not flipping for anything. I call window."

Great, stuck between Ginger and Mr. McCreepy.

"Fine," I said. "I'll take window on the way back. It's only fair," I said when Valerie began to protest.

Jared and I went through security first while Valerie unzipped her boots and removed all her jewelry.

Since we were in the back of the plane, our aisle was one of the first to be called for boarding. Jared held onto all our tickets. It felt patronizing, which I suspected is what he was going for. I had no choice but to follow him and Valerie down the Jetway to our plane.

There were people in the front rows, standing in the aisle, stuffing everything they could into the overhead bin. Rather than wait for them to finish and take a seat, Jared bumped passengers from behind and kept moving. He stopped at the row after ours.

Valerie ducked under the overhead compartments and plopped into her window seat. I took the dreaded middle seat. Once Jared had us blocked in, I dug out my iPod, buckled my seatbelt, and rested my head against my seat, earbuds in place, music playing. The volume wasn't loud enough to block out the screaming child who ended up in the seat in front of me. I turned up the volume and closed my eyes.

I had to leave my musical cocoon during takeoff. The seat in front of me shook when the boy screamed, "I don't want the puzzle. I want to color!"

"You'll have to wait 'til after takeoff," the mother said.

"I don't want to wait."

"You have to."

"I don't want to!"

"Here, have your jelly beans."

"No!"

Jared kicked the seat in front of him. I didn't think the mother noticed because I could see her through the space between chairs leaning forward, rummaging through her big carry-on tote bag.

I couldn't see Valerie behind the book she held in front of her face. *Blood in the Snow* the title said in big, bold red letters. I would've thought she was more a *Glamour* magazine type reader. Then again, I wasn't exactly surprised that she got her kicks reading about cold-blooded killers.

As soon as we reached cruising altitude, I lowered the seat tray in front of me. Dante had grabbed a copy of the University of Alaska Anchorage's summer schedule for me to look at. The fall schedule didn't come out until mid-semester. I pulled the catalogue out of my messenger bag along with a highlighter, flipping through the registration dates, deadlines, and introductory pages until I reached the course listings with their dates and times.

Jared had his iPad out, playing Angry Birds beside me, legs stretched into the aisle.

My tray jiggled when the boy in front of me squirmed in his seat. I reached beside my legs to dig my iPod back out of my bag.

Valerie lowered her book and nodded at my open catalogue. "What's

that?"

"The summer schedule at UAA."

"Are you taking summer classes?"

"I don't know. I just wanted to get an idea of what they offer."

"Can I see that?"

"When I'm done." I found it hard to concentrate with Valerie watching me. "Are you going to UAA or something?" I asked.

"I start this fall."

"Really?"

"Where else would I go?"

That surprised me. I guess I never thought about it before, but informants were probably under the same set of rules as assassins—forced to live, work, and study in-state. Still, I wasn't a hundred percent sure. "Are you in Alaska because you have to be?"

Valerie huffed. "No, I'm here for the beautiful sandy beaches and great tanning weather."

Sarcastic much? Valerie sounded even more disenchanted about being stuck in Alaska than I was.

"Here," I said, passing Valerie the catalogue. Maybe I could see which classes she was interested in and avoid them. I watched her thumb through the pages. "What degree are you going for?"

Valerie sighed in utter annoyance. "It doesn't make a damn difference what degree I get. Our careers have already been chosen for us."

Jared looked up from his iPad. "Whiner."

She very slowly lifted her middle finger at him, her expression totally badass. She would have made a great actress, even though I'm sure she would've ended up being a diva from hell.

What happened to Valerie Ward to get her stuck in this program in the first place?

The only stories I knew were my own and Dante's. Dante had nearly died in a snowboarding accident. Noel didn't want to talk about what happened to her. I bet Valerie wouldn't either, but I couldn't stop myself from asking. "What happened to you?"

"None of your fucking business!" she snapped as soon as my words were out. I swear she knew what I was going to ask before I asked it.

The woman in the seat in front of Jared lifted her head above her seat to glare at us. "Do you mind?"

Jared set his iPad on his thighs and leaned forward. "You keep your brat quiet, and I'll see what I can do about mine."

The woman's frown reached her chin, but she seemed incapable of speech with Jared staring at her like some kind of maniac begging to be provoked.

Her head disappeared. "Keep it down, Sammy," I heard her say.

Valerie turned her attention to the catalogue. As we began our descent

into Juneau, I leaned over her to get a look out the window. Valerie sighed but didn't say anything. She turned her head quickly enough.

Patches of blue sky broke through the gloom. Mountains rose endlessly all around us, half covered in snow. From above, Auke Bay looked like a river flowing between the rugged coastal mountain range. The entire landscape was tinted blue.

Valerie and I watched out the window the whole way down. We hit the landing strip roughly, bounced back up, and hit it again. The boy in front of me shrieked, but I barely noticed. Happily, he and his mother got off in Juneau.

Passengers continuing on to Sitka were asked to remain on board.

Valerie unbuckled and hovered halfway out of her seat. "Excuse me," she said.

She wanted out, which meant I had to nudge Jared who'd slipped his iPad into the seat pocket in front of him and closed his eyes.

I cleared my throat. He didn't respond.

"Jared? Valerie needs out."

Jared's eyes opened. He looked at Valerie. "Where are you going?"

"To the bathroom. Where do you think?"

He stretched in his seat before slowly standing and stepping into the aisle. He blocked the way to the front of the plane, eyes sliding lazily over me as I stepped out, and honing in on Valerie when she reached the aisle.

She made a snort of disgust. "Do you think I'm going to make a run for it? In Juneau?" She started laughing.

It was pretty funny. Juneau might be Alaska's capital, but it wasn't accessible by road.

Jared didn't so much as crack a smile.

Valerie headed toward the back of the plane, laughing as she went.

"I'm going to use the restroom too, as long as I'm up." I hated explaining myself to Jared, but he looked at people in a way that made you feel like you had to narrate your intentions.

The flight from Juneau to Sitka was under forty minutes but it felt good to stretch my legs. I beat Valerie back to our seats.

Jared stood, leaning against the headrest of the chair across from our row.

"It's a shame we don't have a chance to look around. I've never been to the capital," I said, trying to make conversation. He stood impassive. "Someday I'd like to see Mendenhall Glacier."

"You seen one glacier, you've seen 'em all," Jared said in monotone.

Sure, print that one on the brochure.

Passengers began boarding. A young woman had to squeeze past Jared when he didn't move aside. I really hoped that once we found Agent Crist and Mike's murderer, Jared would go back to recruiting and disappear from our lives.

The plane was almost ready for departure by the time Valerie reemerged. She had a look on her face like a cat that just ate the canary. I moved into the aisle, and as Valerie slipped in, I caught a whiff of perfume and cigarette smoke.

If Jared noticed, he didn't say a word.

We weren't at cruising altitude for long, but I listened to music the entire time we were, ignoring Valerie and her smug little smile.

Our plane landed on Japonski Island. Valerie lit up a cigarette while I called my mom to let her know I'd safely landed. Jared pulled up in a compact rental car. Valerie threw her cigarette on the ground before tossing her suitcase in the trunk beside my duffel. She took the seat in back, so I took the one up front. If I could survive three hours mashed up beside Jared on a plane, I could get through a short car drive. By this time it was almost noon.

Jared drove across the O'Connell Bridge connecting the airport on Japonski Island with Baranof Island and Sitka. The road was wet but free of snow and ice. Sitka's climate with its overcast sky and constant drizzle resembled the Pacific Northwest more than the Alaskan interior.

Within minutes, Jared pulled up to the Westmark Hotel. Valerie and I grabbed our bags out of the trunk and followed him into the front lobby, straight up to the check-in counter.

"Welcome to the Westmark," the woman at the counter said cheerfully.

"Reservation for Jared."

The woman had it up on her computer in no time. I couldn't imagine tourism booming in February.

"I see you right here, Mr.—Jared. Two rooms. One with a king-sized bed, the second with two doubles."

Valerie abandoned her suitcase and took a giant step to the counter. "What do you mean two rooms? There are three of us."

"You and Raven are sharing," Jared replied evenly.

"No way. It's the middle of winter. I'm sure there are lots of rooms available."

"Sorry," Jared said in a voice that conveyed the opposite. "Budget cuts."

"Here are your keycards," the clerk said, moving on with the check-in procedure. "We offer lunch and dinner in the Kadataan Lounge, or you can walk to the harbor and find more options downtown. We are also within walking distance of the National Historical Totem Park."

Good, because I doubted Jared planned on lending us the car even if we were stranded on an island.

"Now what?" Valerie asked when Jared stopped in the hallway between our two rooms.

"Now we wait until night. We'll meet in my room at eleven."

"That's eleven hours from now," Valerie said.

I'm glad she mentioned it. It's what I was thinking.

"What are we supposed to do until then?" I asked.

"Watch TV. Take a nap. I don't care." He slipped his keycard into the slot. It clicked once, and he pulled the door open before looking over his shoulder one last time. "Remember, my room, eleven o'clock."

"Just great," Valerie said once Jared left us alone in the hall. "Notice he took the room with the harbor view."

At least she wasn't bitching about sharing a room…at the moment. Valerie swiped the keycard into the door across the hall. Our room didn't have an ocean view, but it was nice, aside from the beds barely resting two feet apart.

She rolled her suitcase to the far bed by the window and set her baggage on top of the chair.

Her phone vibrated and she plopped onto the edge of her bed to look at the screen. She gave a girly laugh before texting back to the person who had messaged.

I dropped my duffel and messenger bag on the floor beside my bed then began digging out the things I wanted to take with me when I went exploring. I needed my wallet, of course, iPod, and digital camera. Sitka might be as far south as I'd get for a while, at least until Melcher cleared me for out-of-state vacation leave. I planned to document the trip even if I was technically on business. I switched my pleather jacket for a raincoat.

Valerie stared at her phone then started giggling. She typed quickly then tossed her phone on the bed beside her.

"So, you're with Gavin now?" I asked.

Valerie glared at me as though she'd caught me reading over her shoulder.

"How is that your business?"

"I'm just curious," I said, sticking my things inside my backpack. "Why do you have a thing for vampires?"

"It's my job. Hello? Informant. And there's the sex," Valerie said. She laughed when she saw my face. "Does that shock you? It shouldn't—you've been with Fane after all."

I hadn't exactly mastered the art of the poker face. Valerie noticed at once. She stood and took a step toward me, coming in for the close-up. A wicked grin lit up her face. "Oh my God, you and Fane never did the bump and grind, did you?"

I glared at Valerie. "And that's none of *your* business."

She snorted. "Don't tell me you're saving yourself for marriage."

"I'm not saving myself for anything," I retorted. I grabbed my backpack.

Valerie followed me to the door. She had a look on her face like she wouldn't let me out of the room without an answer. Well, she could suck it. That's what the vixen did best. "Then why in God's name didn't you do the deed?"

"We weren't together long enough," I said coldly. "You made sure of that."

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10
Sitka

It was still drizzling when I stepped outside. The Toyota hadn't moved. I guess Jared decided to take his own advice and watch TV or rest. I doubted he would use the time to report to Melcher. Somehow Jared didn't strike me as a check in with home base kind of guy.

I pulled my hood over my head and walked through downtown until I reached the harbor. Mid-sized boats were tied up along the docks.

The rugged coastal mountains served as a backdrop in every direction. They all looked so close, unlike downtown Anchorage where the Chugach Range touched the skyline in the distance.

I pulled my hood back and fished my phone out of my coat pocket, hitting "call" next to Fane's name before I had a chance to talk myself out of it. I couldn't help feeling less alone when I heard the sound of his voice.

"Aurora Sky," Fane said, drawing my name out when he answered. "Are you on lunch break or skipping?"

"Neither. I'm on assignment."

"Ah. Fairbanks?"

"I can't say."

"Who have they sent you to kill this time?"

"Hopefully, no one. We've been sent to check out a person of interest."

"Then you admit vampires are people."

"Of course they're people," I said.

"Are you with Dante?"

What was with the third degree? I ought to be the one asking the questions.

"No."

If only Fane knew the truth—that I was stuck with his former suck buddy. I could see his eyes falling out of their sockets if he heard that one.

"Oh, that's right," Fane said. "You've moved on to numb nut number two. I saw you leave the party together. Did jock boy get lucky?"

"Excuse me?" I said in an icy voice. I felt equal parts relieved and enraged. If Fane thought I'd hooked up with Mike, it meant he didn't sneak away and off the poor guy.

Then there was the enraged part. He must think me terribly pathetic to drop my panties a second time for some high school *numb nut* as he liked to call twenty-first-century jocks.

"I mean, that is the only way you'd let a guy stick it to you, right? If he's one hundred percent human he's on the 'okay to bang' list."

My chest tightened in indignation. "Fuck. You. Fane." I was so mad I felt like chucking my phone into the harbor. Instead, I jabbed my thumb on the

end call button so hard I probably left behind a permanent fingerprint.

"Jackass. Jerk. Shit brain. Pig!" I said at the phone, even though he was no longer on the line. Might as well cuss like a sailor while standing in the harbor. I tried to hold onto the anger as long as I could, but I eventually ran out of breath.

Vampire or not, men sucked.

I walked to the end of the dock. Small ripples lapped the beams below my feet. Beyond the harbor, the bay unfurled toward the horizon like an oil canvas. Clouds clung to the sides of Mount Edgecumbe, but it was beautiful nonetheless. I should have taken a picture, but I was feeling too bleak at the moment.

I lifted my face to the mist, relishing the cold moisture on my cheeks. Nature had so many emotions. Right now I swear she understood mine.

If I'd never known the real Fane, the sweet man behind the rough exterior, I wouldn't hurt the way I did now. If he were just a jerk, so be it. But we'd had something. Something I'd never felt for anyone. When Fane and I were together, he didn't just get my mind off things, he made me feel better. He'd told me he wanted to be with me for as long as possible…right before I broke it off.

It would have had to come to that, anyway. He knew why now, well, mostly. Fane didn't know about Valerie's hand in the matter. Even if I could get over my aversion to dating a vampire, it wasn't safe for us to be together and would only lead to heartbreak. Why delay the inevitable?

Those thoughts didn't stop me from mourning what I'd lost. Sometimes, late at night, I liked to play back scenes from our short time together like a favorite hits list. The time he'd beat our opponents at badminton in gym class. The afternoon I ran into Fane in front of the video store and he walked me home in the snow. Our first make out session on the bus. Fane's goofy attempt at *car rehabilitation*, and the way he never hesitated to call and check in on me. Washing dishes together the time he came over for dinner. Skipping class to walk to Portage Glacier. Making out in his car overlooking Cook Inlet.

That Fane felt like a figment of my imagination.

At least he cared enough about me to want me alive. He'd been convincing enough when Noel went to him for help after my abduction. But the moment I was better he couldn't get me out of his sight quickly enough. And now he'd taken to tormenting me.

What did I expect? That I could dump him and then pick back up as friends?

No, nothing would be the same again, and it was my own damn fault for calling him in the first place.

I was glad Fane had spoken to me so harshly. I needed it. I needed to wake up and smell the blood.

With a final glance across the bay, I turned and retraced my steps across the dock.

On my way to the totem park, I popped into the local food co-op and bought a bag of granola.

The totem pole at the park entrance was as tall as the surrounding trees. The next stood in front of the visitor's center. I moved on, grabbing handfuls of granola and munching on it as I walked from pole to pole further into the forested park.

I stopped in front of a wolf pole, shrugged off my backpack and exchanged the half-eaten bag of granola for my digital camera. Sitting on top of the wolf with his pointed ears was a village watchman wearing a hat that reminded me of an orange construction cone. I looked around. It would be nice if someone could snap a photo of me by one of the totems, but the forest was quiet. Just me and a couple ravens watching from the trees. I took a picture and moved down the wooded path to the next totem. They were actually really cool and creepy with their sharp beaks, teeth, unsettling grins, and big black eyes.

I moved deeper into the forest and paused, face-to-face with a wood bear carved at the bottom of a totem. He had what looked like a very long shrimp in his mouth. I turned my camera on and was so focused on taking the picture I never heard the footsteps behind me.

"Ridiculous, isn't it?"

I nearly shrieked. Whatever expression I had on my face made Jared grin.

"I think it's beautiful," I retorted, putting the annoyance I felt into words.

Jared stood directly beside me. I fought the urge to take a step away from him. "A Michelangelo is beautiful. A Rembrandt is beautiful," Jared said, eyeing the totem disdainfully as he spoke.

Sounded like he and Fane's roommate, Joss, had something in common. Total art snobs. "That's like comparing apples to oranges," I said.

Jared gave me a weird look. "Are you ready for tonight?" he asked, turning his back on the totem.

I bent my head as I turned my camera off. I wasn't about to ask Jared to snap a picture for me after he expressed such obvious distaste for native art. "Ready as I'll ever be."

"It could get messy."

I lifted my head and shot him my "I'm numb to the world and its horrors" look. I'd seen it in the mirror, and it had a certain familiar feeling, or rather unfeeling, whenever it came over my face. "It always gets messy," I said, enunciating each word, letting them freeze in the air as I spoke.

Jared's lips twisted into a smile. "I'm trying to decide if you're tough or just acting tough. I think you're acting."

"Think what you want," I said, maintaining the same cold expression. "I made it through initiation and my first and second missions without any formal training."

"Do you recognize me?" Jared asked abruptly.

I didn't have to think about that one. I'd never seen Jared before he appeared in Melcher's office. He had a vibe about him that I'd definitely remember even if I'd been foggy about his looks.

Instead of answering, I replied with a petulant, "Should I?"

Jared kept watching me without blinking. It was more unnerving than usual. "I was there the day of your accident."

"That must have been a pretty sight."

Jared cracked a small smile. "I'm accustomed to it."

I guess he would be if he was the first one on site anytime a potential recruit got into an accident, but that didn't explain how he happened upon the scene of my accident. My mom had told me the agents appeared at the site before the ambulance had a chance to haul me off to a regular hospital.

"How could you have possibly known about my accident so quickly?" I asked. I stared at Jared's face, looking for clues in his demeanor, but he had the "I'm dead to the world" expression down better than me.

"I have my own team. We monitor candidates between the ages of fifteen and thirty-five around the clock, all over the world."

By candidates, I knew that Jared meant people with AB negative blood, the rarest blood type in the world, making up less than one percent of the population. Thanks to Noel, I also knew that they'd tried recruiting people with AB positive blood, the second rarest blood type, but their virus-laced transfusions didn't take. That's how candidates like Noel and Valerie ended up as informants rather than assassins.

Jared stretched his arms over his head. "Melcher has us set up with a fancy software program. It's designed to alert us whenever a candidate's name comes up on a police scanner, newsfeed, or hospital database. I have people monitoring that database. I also have people on surveillance, myself included. I was tailing you the day of your accident."

I stood there for a minute, speechless, as still as one of the totems lost in the trees. My brain told me I ought to be angry and lash out accordingly. What Melcher and Jared were doing was a complete invasion of privacy. They probably knew my entire medical history—everything from braces to chicken pox at age thirteen. They probably had files on all of us ABers. As if that weren't creepy enough, they had people stalking us. Even Jared had joined the fray.

The forest went out of focus. I spoke to Jared without looking at him. "How long had you been following me?"

"From the moment you left school."

"So you saw the accident?" I asked numbly.

"From a certain angle."

"Is that the first time you've ever followed me?"

"No."

That didn't surprise me. "How often did you follow me?"

"We shadow candidates anytime an opportunity might present itself—icy

road conditions, extreme sporting events, motorcycling, intoxication, overdose, gang involvement, depression, recent breakup with a violent ex—you get the picture. There wasn't much to go on in your case. You went to school, went home, didn't drink, didn't do drugs, didn't date. Didn't do much of anything."

My jaw tightened. How thoughtless of me to be such a responsible, law-abiding bore. Good thing I lived in a state with extreme weather conditions. It wasn't much to go on, but it was something.

My mind filled with sarcasm, but I kept it to myself. I was saving my anger for Melcher. Still, I couldn't help saying, "How lucky for you that I happened to get hit when you were tailing me."

That had to be like winning the lottery in recruiter terms. The trillion dollar lottery. I mean, what were the chances?

I met Jared's cold gaze. I could picture him standing in the rubble, looking down at my unconscious body without a trace of emotion.

"It was lucky," Jared said. "Your life is much better than it was before."

My jaw dropped. "How can you say that?"

"I don't understand some of you recruits," Jared said. "You act like you were abducted from some sort of meaningful, fulfilling life. Where would you have been if you hadn't joined our ranks?"

"College! In another few months I would have been attending school at Notre Dame."

"And then?"

"What do you mean and then?"

"What's after college?"

"A career."

Jared gave me a pitying look. "That's the best you could come up with? Go to work, go home, eat, sleep, repeat?"

God, he was maddening. So I'd been a complete bore in my past and now he'd managed to make my future sound equally pitiful in the space of a sentence.

"At least it would have been my choice," I snapped. I squeeze my fingers into a fist around my camera case. I turned on my heel. I started down the path, backtracking through the forest. Before I could go another step, Jared had my arm in a bone-crushing grip.

"I didn't say you could go."

Fear seized me in place. Jared looked capable of anything at that moment, including breaking my arm. His grasp tightened even though I hadn't so much as breathed. My heartbeat quickened. There wasn't a thing I could do about that, and I swear he could hear it.

I heard a warbling and clicking noise in the trees that turned into a ranting *ah, ah, ah, ah, ah* before two ravens took flight. I wished I could join them.

"There goes my namesake," I remarked. My voice reflected nothing of

the panic I felt inside. Something told me the best way to deal with Jared was to stay calm, not try to fight him.

Thankfully that instinct proved right. Jared's grip on my arm loosened as he followed the raven's flight with his eyes.

"Pesky birds," he remarked, letting me go. "Eleven o'clock. My room. Don't be late." He pulled down the edges of his open jacket with a firm jerk then took off down the path.

I didn't move until his receding figure disappeared into the woods. I just needed to get through tonight and get back home. After this, there was no way I'd work with Jared again. I'd make Melcher promise. I'd sooner stick a stake in my eye than go on mission with the psycho stalker.

I could handle Dante and his appetites for food and other less savory activities. I could even handle the backstabbing vixen, but there was something off about Jared. If he'd been anyone else I might have asked for details regarding the aftermath of my accident. Did he call it in to Melcher? What condition had I been in? No, too morbid. Had the other driver died instantly? All Melcher had told me was that the guy in the other vehicle hadn't made it.

I tried to picture the boy's face. It had been so crystal clear in those last moments. He'd been more of a guy than a boy. A twenty or maybe thirty-something guy. The most I remembered about him now was the blue bandana he'd worn tied around his forehead, Karate Kid style.

Too bad he hadn't had AB negative blood because the agents would have saved him, too, if there'd been an ounce of life left in the poor guy. Even the agents weren't that lucky.

The time on my phone said it was half past three. I meandered my way back through the park, ready to get out of the forest but not ready to return to the room. I listened to music on my iPod as I strolled through downtown, getting a picture of St. Michael's Cathedral. That one was for Dante. It wasn't the Notre Dame cathedral, but he'd enjoy it.

"Paris," I huffed under my breath, remembering Dante's brief history lesson.

When the damp air began giving me the shakes, I ducked into a café, ordered a large black tea, and settled into a corner table. Once I'd warmed up and killed some time, I hit the streets. I passed a Mexican restaurant, did a one-eighty, and walked inside. The granola and tea weren't exactly sitting well, and I wouldn't want my stomach to grumble if we had to do any sneaking around on assignment.

I ate my vegetable fajitas slowly, allowing them time to cool. Not like I was in any rush to get back to the room.

I wished Noel were with me. I wished she were sitting in front of me now. She was good company and easy to talk to. I would have loved to discuss the case with her and tell her what happened with Jared in the totem park, to say nothing of his stalking methods.

Had Jared been nearby when Noel died? Or Dante? Or Valerie, for that matter?

For the zillionth time, I wondered how Noel had gone down, but she seemed even more reluctant than Valerie to discuss it—at least she had the one time I tried broaching the subject.

I checked the time on my phone. Almost eight, which meant Dante and Noel must have made it to Fairbanks hours ago—with Dante at the wheel, naturally. I wondered what Noel thought of the speed demon. She seemed capable of handling anything. I just hoped she got over Gavin quickly. Anyone who would go out with Valerie had issues—Fane included. Why couldn't Noel crush on Henry? He always struck me as the nicest of the pair. But that's not how the heart operated.

The heart was one twisted organ. At least I had an excuse. I'd literally lost my heart, and this new one hadn't done me an ounce of good.

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11
Xena: Warrior Princess

I spent enough time at the restaurant to finish all my food. Mom would have been pleased. I wasn't exactly a regular at the Clean Plate Club. I left a tip on the table and dragged my feet back to the Westmark.

Luckily, I had just missed the vixen changing clothes. She'd traded in her jeans and sweater for a pair of workout pants and tank top. When I walked in she was perched on the edge of her bed lacing up her sneakers.

An empty tray with dirty dishes and half-eaten food sat on the room's desktop. There was a glass of red wine on the nightstand beside the bottle.

"Enjoying room service?" I asked.

"The choices were limited, so I made do."

"Looks like you ordered one of everything," I remarked. "Did you put it on the room?" I already knew the answer—of course she put the meal on the room.

Valerie stuck her nose up. "Melcher will take care of it. Budget cuts, my ass. Make sure to save your receipts. Everything we eat during mission gets reimbursed."

"Including alcohol?" I asked, raising a brow.

"Especially alcohol."

Somehow I doubted Melcher would agree to that, but I didn't feel like starting a new argument with Valerie. It looked like she was on her way to the fitness center. I couldn't have timed my return better.

"Where have you been?" she asked.

"Walking around town. I went to the harbor and the totem park. Did Jared come by while I was gone?"

"No, thank God," she said. "He's a real piece of work. Total dick. Have some wine." Valerie inclined her head toward the nightstand.

I grabbed an empty glass beside the ice bucket and poured myself a small portion. The first swallow warmed my throat all the way down.

Valerie stood up. Her phone buzzed beside the wine bottle. I moved aside as she grabbed it. "Nice timing," she said. "I was just on my way to work out," she spoke as she typed out her text.

A moment later she erupted into giggles. "Want to know what Gavin said?"

"No."

"He said he wished I was getting my workout with him."

I took a bigger gulp of wine than I meant to.

"Look at you," Valerie said. I didn't appreciate her smug smile. She set her phone on her nightstand and looked me over.

"What?"

"You're turning totally red."

"Because I just drank wine."

"Two sips."

I took two more swigs as she spoke.

Valerie circled me. "Have you even kissed a guy before?"

If only I'd walked in five minutes later we wouldn't be having this conversation.

I got that feeling inside. The same one that came over me when we stormed into the vamp house together. Like I had to prove something to her. "I've done everything," I said.

"Oh, *everything*," she said, grinning wider. "Was it with anyone I know?"

I shrugged.

"You're bluffing."

I could tell she said it to weasel a name out of me, but I played into her hands all the same. "Fine. I hooked up with Scott Stevens."

Valerie's nose wrinkled. "Ick."

"Excuse me?" Yeah, he was a jock with the personality of a tree stump, but *ick*? From someone who did the seesaw with vampires?

"Don't try to tell me you enjoyed it."

"Fine, I won't." I swirled the last bit of wine inside my glass then tipped it back, downing every last bit.

"No wonder you're so repressed. Sleeping with Scottie Stevens is probably worse than being a virgin."

Sadly, I had trouble arguing with that.

"What about Dante?" Valerie asked.

What about your workout? I wanted to ask back. Shouldn't she go work off all that room service?

Valerie looked me up and down. "He wants you bad."

"Well, it's not going to happen."

"Why not?" She sounded more curious than crude. "I get that his personality leaves something to be desired but at least he's got one. There's nothing worse than a man without character. And his body's hot. You can't tell me you haven't noticed those rock-solid pecs."

Oh, I'd noticed all right. I'd noticed the moment Dante showed up on my doorstep to introduce himself as my mentor. I was with Fane at the time, but I wasn't blind.

"Yeah, he's built," I said slowly.

"What is it? Are you still hung up on Fane?" Valerie challenged.

I should slap her for saying his name, but she'd read too much into that one. The bottle of wine called to me from the corner of my eye, but I wanted a clear mind for the mission ahead. "Dante and I work together," I said, rather than responding to Valerie's taunt. "We have a responsibility to this unit, and I doubt dating on the job would be a wise decision." Plus I wasn't attracted to

Dante that way. Maybe a little more than previously, but it would take a lot more to convince me he was boyfriend material.

"Oh my God," Valerie said with disgust. "How old are you? I swear you just sounded thirty."

I glared at Valerie. At least I hoped I was glaring.

My phone beeped inside my pack. Relieved by the distraction, I turned my back to Valerie and dug it out.

Speak of the devil. I'd received a text from Dante.

Any action?

Not yet. You? I typed and waited.

Nothing. Where are you?

Hotel room.

What are you doing?

Just chilling.

"Just chilling?" Valerie repeated over my shoulder. "That's all you've got?"

I held my phone against my chest. "Do you mind?"

"Come on. Let's see what he said."

"I don't know why you need to see it." Nonetheless, I pulled the phone away from my body and held the screen so we could both see.

Cool.

Not really. I have to share a room with Valerie, I typed for Valerie's benefit.

"Good one," she said. And she sounded like she meant it. "Nothing on this planet gets a guy's blood pumping like the thought of two women sharing a bedroom." She leaned in closer.

Dante texted back: *Just remember, if you're going to fight, use pillows.*

Valerie snorted. "See? Typical."

Before I could respond to Dante's text, he sent a follow up message.

And you can only wear underwear. Hey, I don't make the rules. ;)

Whatever, I typed.

"Give me that." Valerie grabbed the phone out of my hands before I could send the message. She deleted "whatever."

"Dante's messing with you, and you're playing right into his hands. This is exactly what he's expecting, Aurora. It's time he got a dose of his own medicine." Valerie began typing. I tried to see, but her hair blocked my view when she leaned forward. Only when Valerie lifted her head did I see what she'd written and sent.

Actually she stepped out, so it's just you and me.

I breathed a sigh of relief. That wasn't too bad.

Dante messaged back instantly. *Meaning?*

I wanted to ask Valerie the same question.

Valerie smirked and typed. *Meaning I'll strip if you strip.*

"Valerie!" I cried.

She held up a hand. “Let’s see what Mr. Hot Shot replies to that.”

I had to admit I was curious. We watched the screen. It remained blank.

Valerie snickered. “Two can play this game, Don Juan.”

“I am so telling him you who wrote those messages.”

“I don’t care.” Valerie finger combed her hair over one shoulder with her free hand. She had the most gorgeous head of thick, wavy red locks. The color made her look like some fabled siren who beckoned men out to sea before drowning them. If I was honest, I’d have to admit I envied her confidence. She had a way of intimidating even the school’s most popular girls. When we were in gym together at Denali High she walked around the locker room in her lace bra as though it were as comfortable as a cotton tee.

No doubt smoke would blow out Dante’s ears if I could shoot him a mental image of Valerie from our gym days.

As I watched Valerie twirl a piece of hair around her finger, I decided I didn’t want to tell Dante she was behind the texts. It would only make her seem more appealing and daring.

Valerie had already broken Fane and I apart and stolen Gavin from Noel. I wasn’t letting her have Dante, too. He was my friend, my mentor, my wingman. If he wanted to flirt with someone, it would be me, not Valerie.

Valerie began typing on my phone.

“Did he respond?”

“No, I’m adding my number to your address book.”

“Hey!” I said. If she were snooping through my phone book she’d see that Fane was still in there. “Why would I need your number?”

“In case we get split up tonight.” Valerie rolled her eyes, finished typing, and stretched across her bed. Suddenly she propped herself up on her arms. “He took the bait!”

I hurried to join Valerie’s side, leaning into the phone with her.

My pants are off. Yours?

Not yet, Valerie typed.

What are you waiting for?

Give me a sec.

Counting down.

Valerie laughed. It sounded a little too flirtatious for my liking. “This is better than TV.”

I reached my hand out. “I want my phone back.”

Valerie pulled back. “Hold up. Can’t leave the poor guy standing there with his pants around his ankles.”

I tried to grab my phone, but Valerie held it above her head. She rolled to the edge of the bed and stood up, glancing at the screen. She burst into laughter.

“What?” I asked, annoyed, but also not wanting to miss anything.

Valerie held the screen in front of my face.

Need help?

The momentary distraction allowed Valerie just enough time to get away. "You naughty boy," Valerie said, walking to the far corner.

"You didn't type that did you?"

"No. I'm thinking." Valerie looked at me a long while. A smile slowly formed on her lips. Her head bent down as she typed.

"What are you saying?" What was wrong with me? I wanted her to stop but another side of me silently urged her to keep going.

Valerie lifted the screen in front of her face and read. "No help necessary. Would you like me to take off my thong or leave it on?"

I felt my eyes bug out of my head. "Okay, that's enough." I stormed over to Valerie and ripped my phone out of her fingers. She didn't have a very good hold on it, seeing as she was laughing so hard.

"And now Miss Prude spoils the fun. Poor Dante. I think I might actually feel sorry for him."

Valerie grabbed her phone off the nightstand. "I'm going to the fitness center," she said, scooping her sweater off the back of the chair. "Tell Dante I said hi and to text me if he's feeling lonely." Valerie laughed and ducked out before I could tell her to shove it.

I listened to her receding footsteps in the hallway then sat on the edge of my bed for several moments in silence. My palms sweated. Why was I so nervous about reading Dante's response? Dante, for crying out loud. Goofy, annoying, reckless Dante.

I glanced at the bear claw pendant on my nightstand. That had been really sweet the way he lent it to me. Dante loved that stupid claw.

I wasn't attracted to Dante…maybe a little at the moment, but probably only because I felt *repressed*, as Valerie liked to remind me.

I sat at the top of my bed, back against the headboard, legs crossed. Time to face the music. I took a deep breath and stared at my phone.

Aurora Sky wears a thong? If I wasn't shocked before, I am now.

I laughed. That wasn't too bad. Not bad at all. In fact, it was a good place to sign off. I tried to come up with what to say next and had decided on "Now you know one of my secrets. I think that's enough for tonight," when my fingers tapped out something else entirely.

What about you? Boxers?

Commando. ;)

I laughed. Dante was messing around, too. That was probably about as true as me wearing a thong. Sorry, boys. Butt floss wasn't my thing.

Better put your pants back on before you freeze your buns off. I laughed. Good one, Aurora.

Not to worry. I'm in bed…pitching a tent.

It took me a moment to figure out what he meant. When I did, my whole face burned.

Perv!

You started it.

But how to end it? And how to face Dante when I went back home?

Just killing time, I typed.

Wish we were killing time together.

My first response would have been "In your dreams," but that's not what Valerie The Seductress would say.

So it goes. I'll let you go amuse yourself.

Wait! You can't leave me hanging.

I smiled and typed, *Sweet dreams, Dante.*

Tease.

If anyone was a tease, it was Dante and Fane. Taunting me, teasing—tormenting. Boys with their wicked words and suggestions. They knew how to get under a girl's skin, make her body respond without so much as a touch.

I hadn't been in the mood before, but now I wouldn't mind kicking some vampire butt.

I turned on the TV and drank more wine. Valerie returned an hour later. "So, you cut him loose, didn't you?"

I didn't bother looking away from the TV or answering. Valerie walked in front of the screen to her side of the room then crossed again and closed herself in the bathroom. A minute later the shower came on, followed by the hair dryer a good fifteen minutes later.

She strutted out of the bathroom in a matching bra and panty set—black lace. Her hair flared over her smooth shoulders. Locker room flashback.

I guess she didn't care that our curtains were open. She rummaged through her suitcase and pulled out a dagger. Not like I wanted to watch her strut around in her panties, but it was pretty damn distracting when I was trying to watch television, especially when she began posing in the window's reflection with her dagger in hand. She probably saw herself as some kind of Xena, Warrior Princess.

I grabbed the TV remote and turned the volume up, even though Valerie wasn't speaking. Out of the corner of my eye I saw her make a show of laying out her clothes before actually putting them on. Once assembled, she slid her dagger inside her right boot.

I turned off the TV, tossed the remote on the bedspread, and got to my feet.

I had a new belt sheath I attached around my waist before slipping my hunting knife in back and pulling my shirt over it. I liked it a lot better than having to pull up my pant leg to get to my weapon.

Valerie reached into her bag and pulled out a revolver. Once again, she stilled in front of the window with the weapon in her hand.

I tensed. Guns made me nervous. Probably because I'd never fired one before. It actually put me at ease that Melcher stressed combat training and knives.

"What's that for?" I asked, trying to sound calm.

Valerie turned, facing me. "It's called backup."

I watched in silence as she took a small box out of her suitcase. She shook five bullets onto the bedspread. They clinked together. She opened the revolver's cylinder and loaded the bullets one at a time. When she was done, she snapped the cylinder back in place and returned the box to her suitcase. I saw her slip the gun into her coat pocket.

Before heading out, I put the bear claw over my head, hoping very much it was as lucky as Dante claimed.

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12
Crist's Cross

At exactly eleven, we knocked on Jared's door. It opened and Jared filled the frame in a pair of jeans and a dark cotton tee that formed against his solid muscles. He gave us each a menacing stare. "Well, don't just stand there, come in."

Jared had the curtains closed and the lights dimmed. I settled into one of the armchairs and Valerie did the same. I suspected she didn't want to sit on Jared's bed any more than I did.

Jared cracked his knuckles, sending each of us a sneering glance. "While you two were taking it easy, I gained access to the house."

"You mean you broke in?" Valerie asked.

"I did more than that." He reached into his pocket then dangled a gold cross from its chain in front of us. "I found this inside a wood box in the bedroom."

Valerie squinted. "What's that?"

"It's Crist's cross."

Try saying that five times real fast.

"How do you know?" Valerie asked.

"Shouldn't it be silver?" I added.

I knew the whole silver warding off vampires thing was a myth, but Crist always struck me as a traditionalist.

Jared huffed in disgust. "Rookies," he said, rolling his eyes. "Crist wore this cross all the time."

It looked pretty generic to me, and I didn't remember ever seeing any jewelry on Crist, but maybe she slipped it under her shirt. Melcher and Jared knew her better than I ever did.

"What about Mike?" I asked.

Jared squinted at me. "Mike?"

Really? I waited for the name to settle in, but Jared kept with his blank gaze. "The boy who was killed! Did you find his class ring?" I demanded.

"It's probably inside the wood box. I wasn't looking for a ring."

Wow, great detective work.

"What's the plan?" Valerie asked, sitting up in her chair.

Jared began pacing. "We sneak in when they're sleeping, secure the house, split up, and take them all out simultaneously. They won't see it coming."

This didn't sound good. "What do you mean *them*?" I asked.

"Andre, Henriette, and the two teenagers," Jared answered without blinking.

"They have kids?!"

"A lot of vamp teams pose as families. It's not uncommon," he said.

"But…"

Valerie huffed and added her two cents. "They can't have kids, you idiot. They're vampires. Do you need me to explain the ABCs of vampire sex and reproduction? They're dead. Sterile. It's not possible. End of story."

I looked from Valerie to Jared. Trying to reason with either of them was like trying to wrestle a pair of wolverines. Those things were nastier than grizzlies. At least with a grizzly you could play dead or make a lot of noise and in most cases scare it off.

Valerie crossed then uncrossed her legs and leaned forward in her chair. "Look, if these vamps are all hanging out together, they can't be up to any good."

"So that's it then? Guilt by association?"

"Pretty much," Jared said in his arrogant, brutish way I'd come to loathe a thousand times more than Melcher's cool condescension.

"Are they asleep now?" Valerie asked.

Eager beaver. Either that or she wanted to get it over with.

"Maybe. We'll check it out after I go over the game plan." He slid the gold cross on top of the desk. It made a scraping sound. "I'll see to Andre and Henriette. You two will take care of the boy and girl."

"I'll take the boy," Valerie said. Of course she would.

"What are their names?" I asked.

"What does it matter?" Valerie retorted.

Jared surprised me by answering, "Etienne and Giselle."

Now that our targets were no longer nameless vampires, Valerie frowned. "And how exactly do you want us to *take care* of them?"

Jared looked between us with a slight smile then headed to the far corner of his room. He bent down. I couldn't see what he was doing with his bed blocking my view. Jared returned with two small brown bottles and two rags. "Chloroform," he said, setting the bottles and one of the rags on the desk. He moved around Valerie's chair. "You wet the cloth and then hold it over their mouth and nose." As Jared said this, he swooped in, affixing the rag over Valerie's mouth.

The cloth muffled her scream.

Valerie's eyes widened. She began clawing at Jared's arms, but he held firm.

I was on my feet in an instant. "What are you doing?"

A glint appeared in Jared's eyes. His smile looked more like a snarl. Although I'd stood up, I suddenly felt unsteady.

As I regained my footing, Jared released Valerie, straightened up, and took a step back. "That's how it's done."

"I think we get the gist," I said angrily. "No need for a demonstration." God, for a second I thought he really intended on knocking her out. It might be Valerie, but I didn't want to be left alone with el creepo.

I looked at Valerie. It surprised me that she hadn't reacted yet. She had something of a shell-shocked look on her face. The expression changed in a flash to one I recognized—Valerie in a fit of rage. She got up from her chair and turned to Jared. Without warning, she threw a fist at him, but Jared was ready for her. He took her arm as it extended and twisted her around so that her back was against his chest. Valerie cried out. His grip on her arm looked painful. I knew how it felt.

"Nice try, Red, but no amount of advanced training will prepare you to take me on."

"Hey! We're all on the same team," I said. The way Jared exerted his authority was really starting to creep me out.

"Then start respecting your leader," he said right before releasing Valerie and giving her a shove backwards.

She regained her footing, rubbed her arm, and glared daggers at Jared, but she didn't go after him again. She didn't call him a dick either, but I knew she was thinking it.

"Both of you take a rag and a bottle. While I deal with Andre, see that Etienne and Giselle remain unconscious."

"And then?" I hated to ask, but it would come up at some point.

"I'll take care of them."

Why didn't that relieve me? If Jared took care of them, it meant I wouldn't have to. He'd even provided chloroform and rags, which meant I didn't have to blemish my precious neck.

But something about the whole thing made me sick. It wasn't very sportsmanly to knock the kids out without giving them a fighting chance. There, I said it. It didn't feel right.

"Ready?" Jared asked.

I looked at Valerie. She had her eyes on Jared, and I swear she was thinking of pulling the gun on him. I hadn't known Jared long, but I was willing to bet he'd break her arm if she went after him a second time.

I grabbed the bottles off the desk quickly and thrust one in Valerie's hand. "Here, let's get this over with."

She stared at the bottle. "I need a rag."

I handed Valerie the one I'd gotten off the desk then bent down and picked up the demonstration rag that had fallen on the floor.

"Coming?" Jared asked from the doorway.

We followed silently behind him. At the car, Jared swung around when Valerie reached for the door handle behind the driver's side. "You, next to me."

Maybe he was afraid she would try and chloroform him from behind while he drove.

Valerie walked around the car without comment and plopped into the passenger's seat. I took the seat behind her.

Jared seemed to be in no hurry as he drove down the dark, deserted

roads. I looked out my window, but at times like these my eyes didn't connect to my brain. I squeezed my fingers around the claw, careful not to let the tip prick my skin. Too bad I couldn't brain-text Dante. I'd tell him Jared was nuts.

Gravity pulled me back in my seat as we curved our way up a hill. Small rocks crunched under the tires and pinged against the bottom of the car when the road turned to gravel.

Jared slowed then turned onto a paved driveway, pulling right up to a house, and parking the car.

"Won't they hear us coming?" I asked.

Jared leaned back in his seat and swung his head around, a smirk on his lips. "This place is vacant. I checked it out earlier."

Geez, did he stake out the entire neighborhood? Jared had been a busy boy when he wasn't tracking me down in the park or gagging Valerie with a rag. Someone took his job seriously. Way too seriously.

The driver's door creaked open. "We walk the rest of the way."

Valerie and I opened our doors simultaneously and stepped out. Her eyes met mine briefly and she glowered. For once, I knew it wasn't intended for me. She patted her right coat pocket. The one with the gun.

I didn't know what she meant by it, but I shook my head. I didn't want anyone getting shot tonight.

We followed closely behind Jared who led us back to the gravel road. It snaked up into the trees, and the higher we climbed, the bigger the houses were. Lights dotted downtown. The surrounding islands had turned to dark silhouettes against the Sitka Sound.

The gravel rolled and crunched under our feet.

In the distance, the road came to an end at a three-story mansion that looked like a palace made out of smooth slabs of stone. The driveway led directly up to a row of four garage doors. On the far left there was a set of stairs leading to a balcony at each level. They were surrounded by tempered wind-blocking glass.

"Look at the size of this place," I said.

Jared grunted. "Yes, Andre has done quite well for himself."

I wrinkled my nose. "Do you know him or something?"

"I don't just keep tabs on future recruits."

Meaning he also kept tabs on future targets. Now I really had the creepy crawlies.

I nodded my head toward a window on the middle floor. "There's a light on."

"Don't worry about it," Jared said. He led us under the porch beside the garage doors. "Etienne and Giselle live upstairs. There are three ways in. The garage, the door around back, and up to the porch. You can access their bedrooms from the upstairs porch."

"How are we supposed to get in?" I asked. The agents poisoned my

blood and then sent me into the field without practical skills like lock picking.

Jared sneered at me. What a jerk. If Valerie and I were such an annoyance, why bother bringing us? He looked like he did fine as a one-man show. “We’re on a small island. No one locks their doors. How do you think I got in earlier?”

I shrugged. “How would I know?” I’d never considered myself a city girl being from Alaska, but Anchorage was the last place you’d leave your doors unlocked. We ranked number five in the nation’s most dangerous metropolitan areas with Detroit four spots ahead of us at number one. Wonder if they had vampire problems in Motown?

Anchorage’s crime rate was one of those fun facts Dante liked to share with me. He seemed to find it encouraging for our line of work.

Valerie began moving toward the stairs. Jared stepped in front of her. “Knock the kids out quietly then wait with them until I get there. Make sure they don’t wake up.” He headed up the stairs ahead of us and didn’t make a sound as he crept up.

Valerie and I waited until Jared eased back a sliding door and slipped inside the house. I looked at Valerie, and she looked up at the third floor. I waited for her to go first, not wanting to make noise jostling for first place.

Every step we made produced sound against the composite wood porch, but we kept going as quietly as we could. As I passed the sliding door Jared had taken, I took a quick peek inside. A massive kitchen opened up on the other side. All the appliances looked brand new. The whole place had an open, modern feel to it, unlike Marcus’s palace.

Valerie reached the top deck four steps ahead of me. I was surprised she waited for me to catch up. When I did, Valerie crouched down. I did the same.

The awning had kept the porch dry along the house. I leaned against the outer wall of the house and pressed my forehead to the glass. The door led into a rec room. I looked at Valerie and she nodded.

I gripped the edge of the sliding door with my nails. My fingers slipped off the door on the first try. I used my finger pads instead to ease the door gently open. Once I had an inch of space between the door and frame, pushing an opening large enough to slip through was easy.

With my hands and legs, I lifted myself over the sliding door track and scooted into the room. It had thick carpeting. Finally. The chill from outside followed me in. Valerie came in behind me.

She gently closed the door. We listened. The upstairs was silent.

We got to our feet quietly and walked to the hallway.

“I’ll take the right, you take the left,” Valerie whispered. “Whoever you get, go for it. If your target wakes up before we get a chance to knock them out, entice them into biting you.”

Roger that, team leader two.

At the moment I didn’t care if Valerie wanted to get bossy. I was on edge, and I had a feeling she was too. She seemed calmer giving orders.

Whatever it took to stop her rushing in, guns blazing, was fine by me.

For a moment I thought she was going to wish me luck, but that would be stretching her goodwill too far.

Valerie looked to the right, indicating she was going for it. I nodded and crouched as I took ginger steps down the hallway.

I didn't look behind me to see if Valerie had made it to the bedroom on the right. My focus had switched to my personal mission.

Luckily, the bedroom door had been left cracked open. I crouched to the floor and pushed the door open further without pause. Better to do it in one motion than with tiny creaks. I crawled into the room then stopped to listen. If I weren't so on edge I'd feel pretty ridiculous right about then on my hands and knees sneaking into someone's bedroom.

At first I heard nothing, but then the sound of light breathing drifted over from the bed eight feet away.

I looked around the tidy room. There wasn't much to see. The room had the usual furnishings and there were framed scenic photographs on the walls. This had to be the boy's room. It had a musky masculine odor.

I scooted my way to the bed, right up to the side where a dark blue or black bedspread hung over the edge. I rested my back carefully against the bed and listened to Etienne breathe. *Inhale. Exhale.* It put me momentarily in a trance.

I dug the bottle and rag out of my coat pockets, squeezing one in each hand. Then I leaned to the side and quietly got to all fours. Slowly, I rose to my feet.

Etienne slept on his side, back facing me. I sucked in a breath. He looked so angelic with his eyes closed, chest softly rising and falling. He had beautiful thick brown hair. I wondered what color his eyes were. I'd be in trouble if I had occasion to find out.

I took a deep breath and held it—just in case—before unscrewing the cap on the travel-sized bottle of chloroform Jared had provided. I emptied the contents onto the rag.

If I stopped to think things through, I'd hesitate. And once I hesitated I might lose my nerve. So I replaced the cap and pocketed the bottle then dove forward.

Etienne woke briefly. I felt his body jolt when I clamped the rag over his nose and mouth. His body went slack as suddenly as it had jerked. I felt a moment of exhilaration followed by a sickening sense of guilt.

I pulled the rag away. The boy looked the way he had before I knocked him out. I stared at the rag in my hand before setting it on Etienne's bedspread.

Time to wait.

I walked around the room carefully, studying each framed photograph close up. I recognized the one of Saint Michael's Cathedral in downtown Sitka. The other photos were of castles and cathedrals that looked vaguely

familiar. The room was spotless. There wasn't so much as a t-shirt tossed on the ground or on top of the furniture. The only object on the dresser was a set of keys on an electronic key fob with the Mini Cooper logo on it.

I passed by Etienne's open door several times, glancing into the dark hallway. On the eighth pass, I stepped out and listened.

An unsettling silence gripped the house.

I looked to the right, curious if Valerie had chloroformed the girl. She'd probably beaten me to it. I wondered what she was doing now. I heard no sounds. Either way, Valerie would probably shoo me off and tell me to stand guard over my unconscious vampire.

A set of carpeted stairs descended to the left.

What was taking Jared so long? What if Andre or Henriette—or both—overpowered him? Jared might be a nasty brute but that didn't change the fact that he was up against two vampires.

If anything happened to compromise Jared, Valerie and I were sitting ducks.

I listened at the top of the stairs. Hearing nothing, I took the first step down as though it would help me hear better.

Crashing glass and fighting were so familiar to me that the silence felt unnatural.

I stopped halfway down the stairs and reached around my back for my knife. Gripping the handle in my right hand, I continued down quietly.

The stairs ended at a hardwood floor. This was as far as I should go. I needed to turn around and wait with Etienne like Jared had instructed. But I couldn't bring myself to turn around. My fear had detached itself from my consciousness like a scab falling off an old wound.

I placed one foot and then another onto the hardwood floor. I looked right then left. A soft glow traced the outer edges of the wall on the left. I headed toward the light, each step placed carefully.

I stopped once I reached the curve at the end of the hall, listening again. This time I picked up faint chattering.

I crouched down and carefully looked around the corner. The hallway widened, and the light became brighter. I thought about turning back. I didn't.

I walked heel first over the floor, slowly lowering each foot, heel to toe, before picking up again. I moved to a long oriental rug in the middle of the hallway. Much as I wanted to skirt along the wall, the rug would offer the more muffled approach. The hall led into the kitchen I'd seen from outside. The fridge hummed softly. I sheathed my knife, crouched to the floor, and made my way to the long counter in the middle of the room.

The kitchen connected to a large dining room, and the dining room opened into a vast living room. Right off the dining room, the faint glow brightened.

I crouched behind the kitchen counter. The voices continued, so at least no one seemed aware of my presence. Once my heart rate steadied, I strained

to hear what was being said. It took me a moment to realize I couldn't make out the words because they weren't in English.

The voices were from a man and a woman. They spoke rapidly. The woman did most of the talking, and she sounded agitated.

I got on my hands and knees and crawled from behind the kitchen counter to the dining room. I ducked under the table. The woman was still talking when I stopped to calm my breathing. Once I felt I could control it, I looked at the living room furniture, trying to decide if I dared go any closer. I might be able to crouch behind the sofa. The voices were coming from the far corner of the gigantic living room. I'd like to get a look at their faces and see what was going on. Obviously Jared hadn't made his move yet.

On second thought, I should crawl my way back to the kitchen and get my butt back upstairs. If Jared was hiding and I bumped into him I was dead meat.

I had just started turning on my knees when a familiar laugh stopped me cold.

The woman spoke again with urgency in her voice. "*S'il vous plaît ne blessez pas les enfants.*" I recognized the French now. Before they had been speaking too fast, but the woman's last sentence had been simple enough to understand.

Please don't hurt the children.

The next voice was Jared's, and it was just as chilling in French as it was in English. "*Ma pauvre Henriette. Vous avez l'air effrayée et cela pour de bonnes raisons.*"

I crawled to the nearest sofa while they were talking and peered around. It didn't do much good. All I saw were the legs of a coffee table, a large area rug, and a couple recliners.

The woman began speaking again, but I couldn't make anything out. She spoke too quickly. Then her voice cried out, crystal clear. "We have money. We can pay you."

Jared laughed. "Money doesn't interest me," he said, switching to English.

"You loved me once."

"I never loved you, Henriette."

The house fell silent. I wanted them to continue talking. Conversation was the only thing preventing violence. Suddenly steps began running toward me. I laid flat on the floor. As if that would do any good. But before the person could reach me I heard a cry of alarm, followed by a struggle. Something fell to the floor.

Ignoring the voice inside my head telling me to stay the hell down, I lifted my head just over the sofa's back and caught a glimpse of Jared struggling to get a hold on the woman squirming in his hands.

"Andre!" she screamed.

Jared's mouth opened so wide I thought he would bite her. His lips

pulled back in an animalistic snarl.

Henriette's shoulders sagged after shouting Andre's name. Jared wrapped his arms around her neck.

My breath caught.

I didn't close my eyes in time.

In one swift motion, Jared twisted Henriette's neck as though it were no more than a plastic cap on a bottle of Dr. Pepper, but instead of the *phish* sound, it was followed by a *snap*.

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13
The Shining

The Mexican food from earlier rose up in my throat. I clamped a hand over my mouth and hit the ground behind the sofa.

I was too sick to worry about the sound I made. Besides, Jared couldn't hear me over the thump of Henriette's body landing on the floor. Once she'd fallen, I heard footsteps hurrying to the living room from across the room.

"What is going on?" a man cried. Andre, presumably. "Xavier," he said next, pronouncing the name as though seeing a ghost. I expected them to pick back up in French, but they didn't.

"Hello, *brother*."

"How can this be, Xavier? I thought you'd been hanged."

Jared began laughing then stopped abruptly. "While you sat back and did nothing to help me."

"What could I have possibly done? Stormed the La Force? Don't look at me like I'm to blame. You got yourself in that mess, Xavier. How many times did I warn you to be more cautious?"

"You know what I think?" Jared said. "I think you all couldn't wait to be rid of me."

"How did you find us?"

"I have connections now."

In the silence that followed, I realized I hadn't breathed in a long time. I held it until the talking resumed.

"What have you done to Henriette?"

"I delivered the same fate she left to me."

"You should not have done that, Xavier. Henriette wasn't responsible for your actions. None of us were. You have no one to blame for your capture but yourself."

"Ah, but you see, I didn't remain in captivity, and where were all of you when I got out?" When Andre didn't answer, Jared said, "Have you enjoyed screwing my wife over the last two centuries?"

"She thought you were dead. We all did."

Oh no, I thought. *Jared's a vampire.*

Their conversation faded from my mind.

What was a vampire doing working for a vampire hunting unit of the government? Melcher hated vampires. Did he know? He had to know! How could he not know? Which brought me back to my first question. Why was a vampire working with the government?

Laughter interrupted my thoughts. It was male, but not Jared's.

"Arrogant as always. You really believe you can take me on, Xavier? I should remind you I've been around much longer than anyone in this family."

"Which means you should die before me," Jared said.

My body finally sprang into action. I scuttled on hands and knees back to the dining table as the first fist smacked skin. The living room erupted into a chorus of angry shouts and loud thumps.

I've never crawled so fast in my life. I was like a crab making tracks across the scorching sand. Once I'd passed under the table, I didn't care about stealth. I jumped to my feet and ran for the stairs, taking them two at a time.

Valerie stood at the top. "What the hell is going on down there?" she demanded.

"Jared!" I gasped, barely able to get enough air in my lungs to speak. "He's a vampire."

"What?"

"He's a vampire! This is a personal vendetta. He already killed the woman. Now he's fighting with the man."

"Shit!" Valerie said. "What do we do?"

I looked down the hall. "Did you knock out the girl?"

"Of course I did!"

"Okay, okay." I shook my hands in front of me trying to think. "We have to get the kids out of here."

Valerie dropped her arms. "Are you crazy?"

"If we don't, Jared will kill them."

"So not my problem."

"Valerie…"

"How the hell are we supposed to get two full-grown teenagers out of this house…from the top story, no less?"

Valerie was right. There was no way we could do it in time. It would take two of us per body. We had to at least try.

"We hide the boy and get the girl." Valerie's mouth opened to protest. I didn't let her. "We carry the girl down the way we came. You take her legs. I'll take her arms. Then we come back for the boy. Once they're both out front I'll enter the garage through the side door, find Etienne's car, and get the doors open. Once I open the garage door we need to get them inside the vehicle fast. After that we blast out of here."

"And go where? We're on a fucking island!"

"Can we please concentrate on getting out of this house alive and then worry about that?" I felt ready to snap. There wasn't any time to argue.

"What if Jared gets up here before we have time to get them out?" Valerie demanded.

"We'll just have to hope Andre keeps him preoccupied long enough." Or better yet, wins the fight. I wasn't willing to wait and find out.

Valerie followed me into Etienne's room without another word. While I flipped his bed cover aside, she opened the closet door. "Too obvious," she said.

I crouched on my knees to get a look under the bed, but it was barely half

a foot off the ground.

"There's a bathroom over here," Valerie said.

"We'll put him in the tub, just in case."

Valerie grabbed Etienne by the shoulders. I took his feet and led the way to the bathroom. We laid him in the tub and pulled the shower curtain closed.

I pocketed Etienne's car keys as we passed his dresser on the way out. Valerie led the way to Giselle's room at the far end of the hall.

We entered a room with pink walls. Unlike Etienne's room, every available surface had been put to use. The dresser had an army of fairies holding wands, sitting on flowers, and dangling in flight from stands. Stuffed animals filled an entire shelf above the fairies.

Valerie caught my eye as I looked around. She rolled hers then nodded at the four poster bed with a pink comforter.

I'd been expecting someone younger, but the girl lying unconscious looked the same age as us. Her blonde hair fanned out across the pillow. Two swords were mounted and crossed above the headboard. They looked odd against the pink wall.

Valerie went to the head of the bed. I tried not to get annoyed at her defiance of my plan—I'd told her to get the girl's legs. Even in a situation like this, Valerie felt the need to be stubborn. There wasn't any time to worry about it. It didn't matter anyway.

I grabbed her legs and we pulled her off the bed. The girl had on a pair of pink cotton shorts and a white tank top. We'd almost reached the door when a gunshot ripped through the house.

Valerie dropped Giselle. I wasn't able to do much good holding on to her legs. The girl's head hit the floor. At least she landed on the carpet.

Valerie and I looked at each other.

The shot was followed by yelling. No one was dead. Yet.

"We have to get out of here," Valerie said. Before I could open my mouth she added, "Now."

I looked down. "We have to help them first."

"Are you insane? If we waste any more time none of us are making it out of here. Do you think Jared's just going to let us go back home now that we know his little secret?"

"He doesn't know we know."

Valerie made no move to take the girl's arms. Instead, she took a step toward me. "You saw the way he manhandled me earlier. I don't think he ever had any intention of bringing us back alive. He'll probably tell Melcher we died in combat. He's going to kill us and drink from us. Well, me anyway. He won't be able to drink from you, but he sure as hell isn't going to leave a witness standing around. You know I'm right. He's been watching us like a wolf watches mice from the moment we left town. Melcher will have no reason to doubt his story."

"We can't just leave them."

Valerie took a step toward the door. “Fine, it’s your funeral. I’m out of here.”

Before she could take another step, a second shot rang out. This one wasn’t followed by angry shouts. It wasn’t followed by anything but silence. I dropped Giselle’s legs. From the look on Valerie’s face, I’d say her heart momentarily stopped, too.

There was no way to know who the last vamp standing was. Either way we were in deep shit. If Andre had offed Jared, he’d have no problem taking care of the human sidekicks. He might even drink from us. If we were lucky he’d go for me first…before he shot us both, hacked up the pieces, and tossed them in the bay.

Seriously, how could Valerie read creepy stuff like that for entertainment?

I looked at Valerie’s coat pocket. The one with the gun. She shook her head. I didn’t know whether that meant she didn’t have the gun, didn’t know how to use it, or didn’t want to use it.

There was no time to get the girl out, but I couldn’t leave her helpless on the floor in case Jared was the victor of the fight below. I squatted, grabbed her ankles, and dragged her toward the bathroom.

Valerie didn’t assist, but thankfully she didn’t flee either.

I pulled Giselle into the bathroom, leaving her on the floor. I didn’t have the strength to get her inside the bathtub. I looked at the inner doorknob. Sure enough, there was a push down lock on the brass knob for securing the room from the inside. I pressed it down.

As I moved back into the bedroom, I began pulling the bathroom door closed behind me.

“Someone’s coming up the stairs,” Valerie said, her words ending in a low hiss.

I stopped and listened for footsteps. I heard Jared’s voice instead. “Oh girls, where are you?”

I looked at Valerie. She put two fingers to her lips. Quiet? No shit! What did she think I was going to do? Call out, “In here?”

Jared would see us in the hallway if we tried to make a run for the sliding door.

Slowly, we backed up toward the bathroom. Our quiet steps were followed by louder ones as Jared stomped his way up the stairs. He entered the first room. “And where has Etienne gone to?” His voice had an unsettling way of carrying through the walls.

There was a metal scraping sound as Jared yanked back the shower curtain in the bathroom down the hall.

“Nice try, girls,” he said.

The following gun blast shook the walls. My eardrums rang in protest. I thought I saw Giselle twitch on the floor, but it must have been my eyes playing tricks on me. Valerie and I were in the bathroom with her in a flash.

Valerie slammed the door shut behind us and leaned her body up against it.

"It's locked," I said.

Jared rammed against the other side. Valerie shrieked, jumped away from the door, and grabbed me. I screamed. She let go. The ramming noise stopped. "Come on girls, I know you have Giselle in there. Open up and I'll finish the job."

For one sick moment I considered tossing the girl out. Maybe Valerie was wrong. Maybe if we went along with the plan Jared would spare us. I looked around the bathroom. No windows. No way out.

"What's with the gun?" Valerie called back. I had to give her points for asking in a steady voice.

"Andre pulled it on me. Damn fool. Half the homes on the hill probably heard which is why we need to stop wasting time." The last three words were spoken with more menace than the beginning of Jared's sentence. "Open the door."

I looked at Valerie. She looked at the door. "No."

"Open the door now, Red. You do not want to get on my bad side."

I didn't doubt that for a second after witnessing how ruthlessly he'd snapped his ex-wife's neck, but Valerie hadn't heard the conversation below.

"Do you think I'm stupid? I know what will happen if I open this door."

Jared didn't respond. I couldn't make out any movement or breathing on the other side of the door. I tried to listen, but all the keeping quiet had frayed my last nerve. My breath came out ragged. I tried to still it, but I couldn't.

"You had your chance," Jared said calmly.

I heard a brusque movement in the room then silence.

"I think he left," Valerie whispered.

"Probably to get an ax," I whispered back.

"Then we should make a run for it now."

My body tensed. "No way! What if he's waiting in the hall?"

Valerie chewed on her lower lip. I looked at the girl lying at our feet. Sorry, G, I tried. At least her death would be painless and terror free.

"Hey," Valerie whispered. She reached into one of her coat pockets and pulled out the brown bottle. "I still have half a bottle." She pulled a pink washcloth off a stack of folded towels on a metal rack above the toilet. Valerie handed the cloth and bottle to me.

I took them in my hands. "What am I supposed to do with these?"

Valerie pulled her revolver out of her pocket. "I'll hold him at gunpoint while you chloroform him."

If I weren't freaked out of my mind I would have laughed at her insanity. "No way!"

"Shh!" Valerie hissed louder than I'd spoken. She held up her left hand and we listened as Jared returned.

Something banged against the door. Valerie and I screamed. Jared whacked the door again.

Oh God, it was *The Shining*. Unfortunately, I actually had been present the day Mrs. Campbell played the Jack Nicolson horror film in class. The movie might be dated, but it had still freaked me out, especially the part where Jack's wife locked herself in the bathroom, screaming as Jack hacked it down with an ax.

I could just hear him breaking a hole through the door and announcing, "Heeere's Jared," all creepy and crazy-eyed.

He hit the door again.

And again.

Valerie pulled out her revolver, drew back the hammer, and aimed it at the door. She nodded at me once.

My heart froze in my chest. I'd battled baddies and fought for my life, but this I couldn't do. I shook my head.

Valerie shot me a stern glare. It was sort of comforting to see her give one of her normal bitchy looks.

Jared beat at the door without pause. Each blow made a sickening crack. The wood splintered at eye level, but he hadn't broken through.

Valerie gave me another look, full of unspoken orders. She gazed pointedly at the spot beside the door.

One way or another we were going to have to fight for our lives. I moved beside the door, jumping slightly when Jared smashed against it. I looked at Valerie. She looked at my hands. I unscrewed the bottle of chloroform and dumped the remaining contents onto the pink washcloth.

"All right!" Valerie yelled. "We'll come out but first you have to promise you'll calm down."

Jared whacked the door in answer.

A look came over Valerie's face, anger replacing fear. She placed her left foot in front of the right and held the gun steady.

I wished whatever calmness had come over her would rub off on me a little. Sheer terror coursed through my bones. At that point, I didn't even care about looking like a scaredy-cat in front of Valerie.

Jared continued hacking at the door.

The wood splintered around the hole he made when he broke through. We caught a glimpse of his weapon. At least it was an aluminum bat, not an ax or sword. That also meant he didn't have the gun in his hand.

Jared whacked at the hole several more times then reached through. I screamed when his arm shot inside the bathroom and grabbed the doorknob. The lock clicked open when he turned the handle. He yanked his arm back and threw open the door.

I froze.

Valerie didn't.

She fired her pistol without a second thought.

Jared's murderous look turned to one that seemed perplexed. He took a step back and dropped the bat. He looked down. Valerie had gotten him just

below his shoulder blade. Blood stained through his t-shirt.

I felt almost as shocked as Jared. It wasn't enough to put him down though. He bent to pick the bat up.

Scared or not, I knew it was my one and only chance. I leapt forward, pivoting around him, and grabbed his head in my hands as I shoved the washcloth over his mouth.

Please work. Please pass out, I chanted in my head. My mind played back images of Jared snapping Henriette's neck.

Jared grabbed my arm. It was the same grip he had on me in the totem park earlier. This time he meant to break it. I felt it in his bone-crushing grip. I pressed the washcloth against Jared's face with everything I had.

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14
Getaway

Just as my bones felt ready to snap, Jared's grip relaxed and he fell face first onto the carpet.

A sob I'd been holding back gurgled up my throat. I stood up and jumped back as though Jared might revive himself instantly and come after me, but he lay motionless on the ground.

I caught Valerie's movement as she stepped slowly out of the bathroom. She had both hands wrapped around her gun. She kept it aimed at Jared.

"Do you still have your knife?" Valerie asked, never taking her eyes off of him.

"Yes," I answered slowly, not sure what she was getting at.

"Finish him off."

My jaw dropped. "He's our team leader."

"He tried to kill us."

And he killed Henriette, Andre, and Etienne without pause. But I wasn't about to stick a knife in him. "It's Melcher's call," I said.

"Screw Melcher! If you won't do it, I will." Valerie leveled her gun at Jared's head. Her anger took me aback.

"Leave it for Melcher," I said. "We've been through enough this evening, and we have to get out of here. I'm surprised we haven't heard sirens yet."

That got Valerie's attention. She hesitated a moment then pocketed her gun. I thought the situation was diffused, but then Valerie began kicking Jared and screaming, "You fucking son of a bitch!"

"Val!" I yelled.

She stopped and looked at me.

"We need to get the girl in the car."

"You're shitting me."

"What if he wakes up before her?"

Valerie grabbed the bat beside Jared, took it inside the bathroom and tossed it beside Giselle's unconscious body. The aluminum clanged against the tile floor. "There," she said. "If she wakes up first then she can finish him off for us."

"We're not leaving without her."

"Well, we need to go," she said.

"Then grab her ankles." Cussing seemed to get Valerie's attention. She scowled at me, but at least she obeyed and grabbed Giselle's legs while I went for her arms.

We didn't talk after that. We carried the body successfully down the hall and stairs, setting her down for a moment on the second floor, then brought

her down the last set of stairs leading into the garage.

We stopped and set the girl down while I opened the door to the garage. At least she was skinny.

There were four vehicles inside the garage. I looked at the SUV wistfully.

"Which one?" Valerie asked.

"The Mini."

"You're kidding me."

"Nope," I replied, feeling the first hint of a grin since the whole ordeal began.

I unlocked the Mini and pulled the passenger's seat up as far as it would go. While I did so, I heard a loud *slap*. I twisted my head around in time to see Valerie pulling her hand away from the girl's face. "Valerie, what the hell?"

Valerie shrugged. "Worth a try. It would be a lot easier if she could get inside herself."

I sighed. "Let's just get her in the car and get out of here."

I took Giselle's shoulders again and backed my way into the Mini, taking her with me. Valerie held her legs while I did all the lifting and pulling.

"Hey, you're the one who wanted to bring her," she said when I let out a groan.

The Mini was too short to lay the girl across the backseat. I did what I could, bending her legs to make her fit. Once her feet were clear of the door, I scooted back the way I'd come in, bumping my head on the roof before making it out. I stepped out of the car and moved the passenger seat back into sitting position. As I did so, I got a glimpse inside the front of the vehicle. "Crap!"

"What now?" Valerie asked.

I pulled my head out of the car and looked back at her. "It's a stick shift."

Valerie held out her hand. "Give me the keys."

I handed them over and climbed into the passenger's seat as she made her way to the driver's side. I clicked the garage door opener attached to the visor inside the car. The door groaned as it lifted.

Valerie started the car. She grabbed the stick and rammed it into first gear. We jerked out of the garage. She pulled the stick back and the car jerked again. I didn't care so long as she didn't kill the engine. We careened down the hill, passing our rental car parked at the vacant house.

"We have to get off this island," Valerie said.

"Agreed."

"Do you think Jared left the plane tickets in his room?"

"It's possible."

"Okay." Valerie sounded more assured. She stayed the course, backtracking to the hotel. It didn't take long being trapped on a small island and all.

Valerie parked in the far corner of the lot, leaving the keys in the

ignition.

I looked back at the girl. She was still unconscious. “What about her?”

“She didn’t see our faces. She’ll wake up wondering what the hell happened, drive home, and have to deal with finding out her vampire family is dead.” Valerie didn’t sound particularly sympathetic. “She should be grateful she’s alive, but somehow I doubt she’ll appreciate that fact.”

In my opinion, family was family whether they were vampires or humans. This loss wouldn’t come easy. It might be worse. This girl had spent generations with her family. Then to lose every single one of them suddenly…. Then again, I had my own problems to deal with and Valerie was right—she was lucky to be alive.

Valerie got out of the car first. Before I slipped out, I pressed the self-lock button on the Mini’s key fob, securing Giselle inside the car.

Valerie and I walked up to the hotel in silence. A middle-aged man wearing a pair of black framed glasses stood at the front counter, tapping at the computer in the deserted lobby. “Leave this to me,” Valerie said. “I’ll get Jared’s spare key and meet you back at our room.”

I nodded once. We split apart.

I quickened my pace in the hall, wanting only to get to the room and feel safe, but once I reached it, I wanted to grab my things as fast as I could and get the hell out of there. Jared knew where our room was. This was the least safe place in all of Sitka.

Most of my things were still in my duffel bag. I tossed in the items that weren’t. That completed, I went into the bathroom.

Valerie had her junk all over the countertop: hair dryer, big round brush, hairspray, lipstick, mascara, toothpaste and toothbrush.

I looked up, staring into the mirror. My face seemed paler than usual. Although I didn’t have any open wounds to clean this time, I turned on the faucet and splashed cold water over my face. Rubbing my skin dry with the hand towel reminded me of how I’d chloroformed Jared.

And Valerie had shot him.

If he ever caught up to us, we were dead. Not undead. Dead. Goodbye cruel life!

Maybe I should have let Valerie kill him. It’s not the kind of decision I had wanted to make with only seconds to spare. We needed to get back to Anchorage, and we needed to tell Melcher what happened.

I froze and stared into the mirror, locking eyes with myself. I had big pupils. People were always telling me they made my eyes look black the way they practically covered my irises. I looked into those black spots and tried to control the tremble that had started in my legs.

Jared was a rogue agent now. A rogue *vampire* agent! He knew our operations. He knew our names. No matter where we went, he knew where to find us. Melcher would expect us to finish him off. He was a threat to us all.

Is that how Agent Crist died? Had she discovered his secret? Perhaps

she'd been on her way to tell Melcher. And Mike? That still didn't add up. Jared didn't seem to have a clue about Mike.

I slipped my knife out of its sheath, holding it in front of the mirror much the same way Valerie had held her dagger and gun in front of the window.

"It has to be done," I said to my reflection. I returned my knife to its sheath and waited for Valerie in the bedroom.

She returned, grinning as she held up a piece of paper. "Found our flight confirmation inside the bastard's baggage."

I frowned. "Valerie…"

Valerie's smile dropped. "What?" she asked impatiently.

"We have to go back."

Her entire face contorted in disdain. "The hell we do!"

"You know we can't let Jared wake up."

"Wait a minute. Now you're telling me you want to kill him? I told you that back at the house. You had your chance, Aurora. It's too late now." Valerie made a sound of disgust and stormed over to her suitcase. She reached into her coat pocket and pulled out the revolver. I heard the bullets clink together inside her suitcase as she emptied the chamber.

I took a step toward her, stopping at the edge of her bed to give her space. "If we don't take care of him, we're leaving ourselves in danger, not to mention Noel, Dante, and every operative in our unit. I think he killed Agent Crist." I was sure of it. And how convenient to remove her cross after killing her and plant it at the Morrel's house. Hell, he didn't even have to plant it. He simply waved it in front of our faces and told us what he wanted us to believe. The only thing I wasn't sure of was Mike. How would Jared have tracked him down and why? And if he had killed Mike, why not pocket a memento of his, like his class ring, and use it as part of his charade? That simply didn't add up. It's like two unrelated killings had occurred, but then why had both bodies been found dumped at the same location and time? Argh! I felt like my mind was going to explode.

"Probably," Valerie said in answer to my theory about Crist. She tossed her gun inside her suitcase, stormed past me, and disappeared into the bathroom. Her toiletries clacked together as she gathered them up. She returned a moment later, carrying a striped bag which she tossed in her suitcase. The zipper made a ripping sound as Valerie closed it. She set it on its wheels and met my eyes. "There's nothing we can do. The police are probably there by now. Melcher can have someone take care of him while he's inside a cell."

"We should call Melcher."

Valerie snorted. "Right. I'm sure he's sitting behind his desk in the middle of the night waiting for our call." She held up the piece of paper she'd snagged from Jared's room. "What we need to do is get out of here. Lucky for us, our return flight leaves at 6AM. So let's say we get our asses to the airport and off this damn island."

I opened my mouth to speak, but Valerie cut me off. “It’s our only option.” She moved briskly to the phone on the nightstand. “Yes, this is Ginger in room 102,” she said into the phone. “We’re going to need a taxi to the airport. Thanks.” She set the phone in the receiver. “Let’s wait out front. I want to put this place behind me as soon as possible.”

I didn’t argue. Valerie was right. What could we do at this point?

I hoisted my duffel bag over my right shoulder and followed Valerie into the hallway to the lobby.

Our breath came out in foggy puffs as we waited for the cab outside. This early in the morning, the sky was as black as the Prince William Sound right after the Exxon Valdez oil spill. Valerie’s hand shook slightly as she lit a cigarette. For the second time in my life, I felt like asking for a drag.

I think we both breathed a sigh of relief when the taxi pulled up.

“To the airport?” our driver asked once we’d tossed our luggage in the trunk and taken our seats in the back of the car.

“Yes,” we said simultaneously.

“How long is our layover in Juneau?” I asked once the wheels on the cab began moving.

Valerie studied the flight conformation. The paper hadn’t left her hand since she walked into the room with it. “Our flight lands in Juneau at 6:43 a.m., departing Juneau at 12:27, and arriving in Anchorage at 2:05 p.m.”

I leaned into Valerie, doing some quick calculations as I stared at the flight confirmation. “Six hours.” That was a long time to stick around the capital twiddling our thumbs. I thought briefly of Mendenhall Glacier. I definitely was NOT in the sightseeing mood. I felt like I was running for my life, which was ridiculous. Jared was the one in the wrong. Jared should be the one afraid. Melcher hunted vampires. Well, not personally, but he had a team of hunters at his beck and call.

I still wanted to know how Melcher recruited *The Recruiter*. And no more of his cryptic, bullshit answers. Our team leader had nearly killed us.

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15
Takeoff

After we checked in, we settled into two scuffed up chairs in the farthest corner of the terminal. We had a little over two hours to wait until boarding. As soon as we sat, Valerie whipped out her phone.

"What are you doing?" I asked, alarmed. "You can't go telling Gavin what's happening."

Valerie looked up from her phone and gave me a menacing glare. "He thinks I'm in California visiting my mom and annoying sister."

My shoulders stiffened. "I suppose I'm the annoying sister."

Valerie smirked without answering. She bent her head down and began texting.

I pulled my own phone out and sent Dante a quick text message.

Jared's a vampire. Valerie and I are on the run. Call me when you get this.

As if that last sentence was needed. I wished I could see the look on Dante's face when he read the text. How many hours until he saw it? The time read three twenty-five. It would be a while yet. He might think I was playing around again.

I looked over at Valerie, still busily texting. "What do you think Jared will tell the police when he wakes up?"

Valerie stopped typing. Her bottom lip turned down. "I don't know. He'll come up with something."

I didn't doubt it. "Do you think the officers are safe?"

"They've probably locked him in a cell for questioning. I mean, they found him with a gun inside a house full of dead bodies."

"Is there anything linking us?" I asked. "What if they trace Jared back to the Westmark? We're under his reservation."

"Under false names."

"But if they questioned the clerk on duty he'd tell them we left for the airport."

"Then let's hope he doesn't wake up anytime soon." Valerie crossed her leg and began jerking her foot around.

"What if they notice the rental car and trace it back to the hotel?"

Valerie's foot stopped. She turned and glared at me. "Will you give it a rest already? You're making me nuts. There's nothing we can do besides sit here and wait for our flight to take off." She made a point of holding her phone up to her face.

I fiddled with the bear claw.

Valerie lowered her phone and watched me a moment. "What is it with that thing? I saw it on Dante before we left."

"He lent it to me."

"Is it like a promise ring or something?"

I squished up my face. "No. We're partners. That's all. At least we were until Melcher forced you on me."

Valerie narrowed her eyes. "Sooner or later Dante's going to tire of your prudish games and move on, you know, and I'd bet my bootstraps you aren't going to like it when he does."

"I hope Dante does find a nice girl," I retorted.

Valerie placed an arm on the armrest between us, leaning in closer than I liked, her fire engine red lips inches from mine. Only Valerie would find the time to reapply her lipstick while running for her life. "Dante doesn't want a nice girl, and you don't want a nice boy. Why do you think you were attracted to Fane?"

My first thought was that it wasn't any of her damn business. My second was that no words came readily to mind.

"When did you notice Fane?" Valerie asked. "Before or after the accident?"

"He's a little hard to miss," I said sarcastically.

"No. When did you *notice* Fane?"

I stared at the empty rows of chairs in front of us.

I noticed Fane the first time I laid eyes on him, sophomore year. He'd looked exactly the same back then, which made sense now that I knew he couldn't age. Even his hair had been the same—that unnatural shade of black, cropped on both sides, and mop of blond flipped back on top. I noticed Fane the first day he walked into English late. I'd gotten goose bumps as he breezed by my desk towards the back row in his long leather coat. My arm hair had prickled as though I'd just been passed by a ghost.

I'd noticed him as someone to avoid.

It wasn't until after the accident that I wanted him to notice me. That's what changed. I wanted Fane to see me. I didn't miss the way he looked at the rest of the student body as though they were faceless, nameless drones going about their day. Back then he only had eyes for Valerie, and it had given me the shivers to see how much attention a boy could give a girl.

Then, by some twist of fate, Mr. Mooney paired us up in gym class. It had only been for one class period, but it had been enough. Fane saw me as no one else had since the accident. And then I'd run into him in front of the video store and he'd walked me home. I didn't know him at all, but he put me instantly at ease. After that I'd wanted to jump his bones, but I didn't. I jumped Scott Stevens instead. *Yuck*. Good one, Aurora.

Fane wasn't available when I made my stupid list of New Year's Resolutions.

I did get to kiss him though. A lot. That is until Valerie put a stop to things. To be fair, I'd put a halt on kissing once I discovered he was a vampire. Those lips had sucked blood from human veins. It didn't bother me

as much now.

"You are thinking way too hard," Valerie said. "Fine, you don't want to talk about Fane. It's probably best, all things considered. At least you're not as big of a pansy as I originally thought. But back to my original observation. Dante doesn't do nice and neither do you. It's the vampire blood. Deny it all you want, but you're sick. We're all sick. Noel, too. The agents made us this way."

"What way? What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about rabies and TB. It's not a lot, but it's enough to increase our sexual appetites."

Sounded like a convenient excuse to me. Sure, Valerie wasn't a sex addict by choice; blame the viruses flowing through our bloodstreams.

"Where are you getting your information?" I asked. It wasn't like there was a manual on vampire traits and characteristics.

"Boot camp. Hasn't Melcher talked to you about it?"

I shook my head.

Valerie smirked. "I guess he's not convinced you have what it takes."

"Fine by me. I don't want to go to vampire boot camp."

"Anyway," she said, ignoring me. "Part of training included a course on understanding the enemy. Has Dante not told you anything?"

"A little. It's a lot of information." I'd like to see Valerie try mentoring a new hunter. There was a lot of ground to cover.

"I thought he would have shared the sexual stuff with you right out of the gate."

I'm glad he hadn't. We'd talked about sensitivities to garlic and sunlight, not sex. I wanted to know more without having to ask. Luckily, on this subject, Valerie was happy to elaborate. "Tuberculosis causes periods of fatigue. It also increases sexual appetite. Rabies is worse. The disease messes with the part of the brain that helps people sleep at night. It kicks their sex drive into fifth gear."

Valerie lifted a finger. "We have the same blood." She lifted a second. "We have the same viruses." A third. "We have the same symptoms." She sat back in her seat, shooting me a triumphant look.

I didn't know what there was to be happy about. In a sense, we were vampires. The only difference was that we were aging vampires. I shared this observation with Valerie, who actually looked impressed.

It was sort of nice to talk to somehow who noticed the symptoms.

"What about blood?" I asked suddenly. "Do you ever get cravings?"

Valerie smiled. Her eyes took on an unnatural shine under the florescent lights. "I don't see why vampires should get to do all the sucking."

"You sucked someone's blood?" I asked, alarmed. Cravings were one thing. The thought of biting into someone's skin was too horrific to contemplate.

"No, stupid. I can taste my own blood on vampires' tongues after they've

bitten me."

"Eww."

"Grow up, Aurora. It's time to take off the granny panties and wear the thong." Valerie turned her attention back to her phone. I didn't know why I felt disappointed. Maybe because out here Valerie was all I had.

"Are you from California originally?"

Valerie lowered her phone slowly. Her expression started taking on the familiar hostile look. "Why do you ask?"

"That's what you told Gavin—that you were in California visiting your mom and sister. I wondered if your family really lived there."

"You want my advice, Aurora? Don't meddle in other people's lives, especially trained assassins." She stuck her face inches from mine. "I know I'm technically an informant, but I've had the training and I've done the killing. So back off."

Whoa, okay then. I leaned away from her.

She stood up, slipping her purse over her shoulder. She left a larger handbag on the seat. "Watch my bag while I'm in the powder room."

Unlike Jared, I wasn't worried that Valerie would split. She wanted off this island as much as I did.

After Valerie returned freshly perfumed, she pulled out her *Blood in the Snow* novel.

"How can you read that?" I asked.

Valerie looked from her book to me. "The world is an ugly place, Aurora. You gotta face the facts." She opened the book to the last spot she'd dog-eared and lifted the paperback halfway to her face.

"Doesn't mean I want to read about it," I mumbled.

I spent the rest of the wait flipping through songs on my iPod, searching for ones that might calm me. I wasn't having much luck listening to a single song all the way through.

More passengers entered the terminal. When a small crowd had gathered near the gate, Valerie lowered her book, dog-eared the corner, and slid the paperback inside her bag. She got up and I followed suit.

As soon as the airline's agent walked behind the gate's counter, Valerie edged her way to the front of the crowd. I stuck to her side. Once boarding began, we were ready with our passes to get on first.

We were in row fifteen on this flight. Valerie charged in first, so I didn't bother protesting when she took the window seat again. I just wanted to be wheels up already.

I slid into the middle seat beside Valerie. Somehow, I felt like if I sat in Jared's seat he'd appear to claim it. Valerie checked her phone again, but from her frown I guessed Gavin hadn't been responding. Her foot tapped the floor until the captain came on the intercom and said, "Flight attendants please seat yourselves for takeoff." Then it stopped.

The plane taxied to the runway. I couldn't see much out the window. It

was still dark this early in the morning.

My entire body thrummed as our plane sped up, faster and faster, then lifted off. I breathed a sigh of relief the moment the wheels left the tarmac.

Valerie unclicked her seatbelt as soon as we were at cruising altitude. "Let me out."

My jaw tightened. She didn't need to pee. I knew that much. "Do you seriously want to tamper with the smoke detector and risk having the captain turn this flight around or hold us in Juneau?"

"Fair enough." She sat back in her seat and hummed to herself a minute before opening her book again.

We were only in the air for thirty minutes before landing in Juneau. The cities weren't that far apart, but the airplanes ran at slow speeds between the two towns. I wasn't nearly as far away from Sitka as I'd like to be. Six hours was way too long of a layover. Plenty of time for Jared to wake up. Luckily the next flight out of Sitka wasn't until 6:20 p.m. Even if Jared somehow got out of jail that morning he wouldn't be able to catch up to us.

Valerie unbuckled before the plane came to a complete stop at the gate. I didn't know what the hurry was. Once we reached the terminal, she began walking in long determined strides. I hurried to keep pace. "Going somewhere?"

"To the check-in counter."

"But we're already checked in through to Anchorage."

"I'm not going to Anchorage."

"What are you talking about?" The feeling of panic swept back in.

Valerie stopped in the middle of the hall. There weren't a whole lot of people around, and the ones who were easily moved around us. Valerie's expression took on a look of almost childlike excitement. Now she was really scaring me.

"Now's our chance, Aurora."

I had a good idea where she was going with this, but I asked all the same. "Our chance to what?"

"Fly the coop. Escape."

I didn't consider it for a second. Oddly, I felt appalled by the idea. Fleeing meant running...forever. Without the monthly antidote I'd lose my humanity. Become one of the diseased for all of eternity, or until Melcher or his predecessor found me. And the same went for Valerie.

"You know we can't do that," I said.

"Speak for yourself."

"Without the antidote you'll turn into a vampire."

Valerie's lips pursed. "I'm already dead as far as my friends and family are aware, so why not? Why the hell not?"

I couldn't think of a response as I stared at her. It wouldn't have mattered anyway. Valerie's mind was made up. She grinned when I didn't answer. "You know I'm right." She began walking again.

I fell into step beside her. My thoughts were running a million miles a second. It's not that I was considering anything, it's just that I couldn't believe she was really making a run for it. "Melcher will find you."

"No he won't."

"Of course he will. He has unlimited resources."

Valerie smirked. "I have resources, too. One of the perks of being an informant. I have contacts. Lots of them."

"Is there a big network of vampires or something?"

"That's for me to know and you not to." Her smile widened.

"You're serious about this?"

Valerie began walking. I'd never seen her look so happy. "I think I'd make a great vampire—gorgeous for all eternity."

Sure thing, Evil Red.

I didn't know if I liked the idea of Valerie becoming a vampire. Working with her had been hard enough. Facing off?

I pictured her holding her dagger and gun in front of the window. Her love of brutal crime stories. The way she stabbed the vampires who killed the pizza boy in Anchorage. Her general attitude. No, I didn't like it one bit.

"Don't do this, Val."

She gave me a pitying look. "I've played by their rules long enough. It's time to take back my life."

"What am I supposed to tell Melcher?"

"Hell if I care."

"You're putting me in a really difficult position."

"Then come with me. I can hook you up. Wherever you want to go there's always someone who knows somebody." She snickered. "Don't tell me Alaska's your dream destination."

"It's my home." More importantly, it's where my mom was. If I left I could never see her again. I didn't think my mom could handle losing both me and my dad. She'd already come close to losing me once. That's the whole reason I was in this mess. She'd made a deal with the devil, and like it or not, I was in on that deal.

Suddenly Valerie frowned. "Don't tell me this is about Fane because you can kiss that fantasy goodbye for good."

I gnashed my teeth together. "This isn't about Fane. My mom's in Anchorage."

She raised a brow. "The woman in the bathrobe?" she asked coldly.

I don't know why I expected to receive an ounce of compassion or understanding. I always knew this wouldn't be a bonding mission, but after everything we'd been through, you'd think Valerie would be slightly less hostile toward me. And what did she care about Fane? Not only was she taking off, she had Gavin now.

I followed her up to the check-in counter where she immediately launched into a story about having just received an emergency call from her

mother in the states. Her sister had been in an accident and Valerie needed to get home at once. I wondered if she even had a sister. She struck me as more of an only child.

The clerk was very polite and didn't have much trouble finding a flight departing for Seattle in three hours. Lucky.

While the clerk leaned her head into her computer, Valerie turned to me. "Last chance."

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16
Payback

I met Valerie's eye. Surprisingly, I had no interest in taking off. I wanted to be free, sure, but not like this. "I can't," I said.

"Figures." After that, Valerie turned her complete attention to the clerk while they made arrangements to have her luggage pulled from the baggage bound for Anchorage.

Yep, couldn't flee the state without her handy-dandy dagger and gun.

I stuck by Valerie, even after she'd received her new boarding pass. I wasn't sure what else to do. Were we enemies now? I mean, officially? What would Melcher want me to do in a situation like this?

For now I supposed the only thing to kill was time. "Want to get a coffee?" I asked.

"Why not?" she said.

We ordered the largest coffee they had from a stand and settled into the nearest seats with our tall paper cups. I took the lid off mine so it would cool faster.

I checked my phone, feeling my forehead crease when I saw there were no new texts or messages. "I'm surprised Dante hasn't called me."

Valerie shrugged. "Maybe their vampire is Crist's real killer."

"Jared killed her. I'm sure of it."

Valerie shrugged again. "Doesn't matter to me."

"Maybe I should try Noel."

Valerie let out a heavy sigh. "Can you just leave it alone? Let them do their job. Or whatever it is they're doing." She grinned wickedly. "Maybe those two hooked up. Noel usually prefers vampires, but as you pointed out, Dante is only one injection away from becoming a full-fledged member of the undead. Noel might make an exception for him, and Dante might make an exception for her. You did get him all worked up last night, and guess who happened to be nearby and handy?" Valerie sneered. "Little 'ol Noel Harper."

I glared at Valerie.

"Don't tell me it hasn't gone through your mind."

No, actually, it hadn't. Noel and Dante were the last two people I could visualize hooking up. Still couldn't.

Maybe Valerie's departure was for the best. No more snide comments or bitchy retorts. I wouldn't mind living a Valerie-free life. There was only one problem. "What will you tell your contacts about our operation?"

"Nothing."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"I'm already on the run. Do you think I have any desire to make myself even more of a target than I already am once I step foot on that plane? All I

want is to live my own life and answer to no one but myself."

"What will you tell Gavin?" I demanded.

"That I'm a vampire. That's all he needs to know."

I snorted. "You're just going to spring it on him. Hey, not only am I your suck buddy, I'm a vampire. Why would you have kept it from him before?"

Valerie's bold red lips came closer to mine when she leaned forward. "Because I didn't know I was a vampire until someone tried to hunt me down. That's why I'm on the run." She leaned back, satisfied.

"How did you become a vampire?"

"I died a year ago," she answered coldly. Her jaw tensed. "I was murdered."

"What?" I nearly spilled my coffee. "Who tried to kill you?"

"If I knew that, he'd be dead."

"What happened?" This was crazy. I couldn't believe she'd finally shared.

Valerie's fists tightened. "Psycho came at me from behind when I was having a smoke outside a club one night. Didn't ask for a thing. Didn't try to rape me, either. He stuck his knife in here," Valerie said, touching a spot behind her shoulder. "And here." She touched behind the other shoulder. "And back here." She reached her arm around her lower back. "What really pisses me off is I had a gun in my purse, and I couldn't even get to it."

My eyes widened. "What were you doing with a gun?"

"I'm from L.A. You don't stand alone outside at night without some kind of weapon or at least pepper spray. I'm not stupid." Valerie's fingers curled back into fists. "I never saw him coming. Never even heard him until he had me by the neck. I couldn't even scream. After he stabbed me three times, he tightened his fingers around my throat and choked every last breath out of me. Next thing I knew, I was in Alaska. Mother fucking asshole of the world."

"How did you get here?"

"I was flown up, obviously." She shot me her trademark glare.

"But how did the government find you?"

"Like I know."

I thought of Jared, master of recruiting. Sounded more like he did the killing than the recruiting to me. Right place at the right time, my lily ass.

He could tell Melcher he found Valerie after she'd been strangled and mugged. He could tell Melcher anything he wanted.

A sick feeling twisted in my gut. The image of him grabbing Valerie from behind in the hotel room raced across my mind. Sharing any hunches with Valerie didn't seem wise. She'd want to turn back around and kill Jared if she had any suspicions. But first she'd want to murder me for stopping her from killing him in the first place.

This whole Jared thing was getting creepier by the hour.

He'd claimed to be at my accident scene as well. Had he done something to my brakes? No, my car had been fine. It was the oncoming vehicle that had

slid into my lane.

I pictured Jared polishing the ice on the corner where I'd bitten the dust.

Ridiculous notion.

Maybe he messed with the oncoming vehicle's brakes?

Again, ludicrous. Even a vampire couldn't plan the exact moment two cars would pass inside an icy curve.

Still, something wasn't right. Melcher owed me answers and this time he better be more forthcoming.

"Anyway, the experience taught me that humans are psychos, not vampires," Valerie said. "Melcher tried brainwashing me into thinking otherwise. I played along. Did the summer boot camp. Combat training. Learned everything I could about fighting and vampires. I became an informant. Met my first vampire. Met more vampires. And bided my time for a day like today."

"What about going to college? I thought you wanted to sign up for classes at UAA."

"You think the University of Alaska Anchorage is an incentive to stick around? Fuck that! Fuck you! And fuck this state!"

"Well, whatever," I said.

"Yeah, whatever."

We sipped our coffee in silence.

"Want to see me off?" she asked at a quarter after nine.

"Why not?"

We walked slowly to her gate. It felt like a dream. It's not like I'd gotten any sleep that night, and I was starting to feel it now that things had calmed down. I kept expecting government agents to rush in and grab us, but the airport was eerily quiet. Even our conversation came to an end.

Valerie and I stood watching the gate together. We watched passengers milling around; watched the agent take her place behind the counter; watched the plane land, taxi in, and unload; watched two stewardesses roll their luggage to the gate and disappear behind the door leading from the jetway to the plane.

Valerie turned to me. "Melcher knows about Fane."

A shockwave went through my brain. "What?" Oh, I'd heard her all right, but I couldn't process the information. The last twenty-four hours had been filled with too many surprises. This one nearly knocked me off my feet.

"Francesco Donado," Valerie said wistfully.

My chin dropped. I gaped at her, but Valerie gazed into the distance like her memories were hovering at the far end of the terminal.

"He was my first assignment. God was he ugly." She chuckled softly to herself. "I wouldn't have given the time of day to a guy like that in California." Valerie puffed up suddenly and looked at me. "I could have any guy back home." She snapped her fingers. "Like that."

I rolled my eyes.

"When my blood transfusion didn't have the desired effect, Melcher ordered me to become a vampire whore."

My jaw dropped. "But…" I couldn't finish. I didn't know what to say. Guess I shouldn't complain about being a hunter. Obviously there were worse things. Maybe Noel wasn't as into Henry and Gavin as I thought. Maybe she'd been ordered to do whatever it took to get close to the enemy. The whole thing made me sicker than sick.

"What did Melcher want from Fane?"

Valerie flicked a strand of hair out of her face. "Names."

"Did you get any?"

"Some."

My heart knocked against my chest wall. "Is he in danger?"

Valerie snorted. "Fane's too valuable to kill. He's been around a long time, and he's traveled extensively. He knows a lot of vampires. I'm not the first informant Melcher tried to set on him." She gave her hair another toss, smiling wickedly. "The girl before couldn't get him to bite. They transferred her to Fairbanks."

"Janine?" I asked, mouth dropping.

"Who? Anyway, I completed boot camp, enrolled at Denali High, and *snap*, hooked the elusive Fane Donado. He wasn't much to look at, but the things he could do with his tongue…" Her grin widened.

She was trying to upset me with the tongue thing. From the way my jaw ached I supposed it was working.

The flight agent announced they would be boarding soon. Valerie hoisted her purse over her shoulder and moved toward the line forming outside the jetway.

A sudden thought occurred to me. "So that's why you needed me to break up with Fane? You had orders to be with him."

Valerie smirked. "That was payback. No one breaks up with me. Not even a vampire."

The flight agent opened the door to the jetway. Passengers encroached in our space. At this point I couldn't see the point in responding to Valerie's jibe. She was who she was—a backstabbing vixen to the end.

"Well, good luck to you." I didn't know what else to say.

"Yeah," Valerie said. "Watch your back."

I couldn't be sure if she meant in general or because of her. It didn't matter. The moment she headed down the jetway, she aligned herself with vampires.

I didn't stick around to watch Valerie's plane take off from the window. I didn't envy her. She wasn't headed for freedom but a life on the lam. A life of eternity. I couldn't understand the appeal of it. Live forever? What was the purpose? What was so special about life that made someone want to hold on to it indefinitely?

I wasn't going for dark or moody at the moment. It's just that life had

ceased to bring me joy. Why prolong that?

I heaved a sigh and headed out of the terminal. I could use a breath of fresh air, even if it was drizzling. The mist turned to rain when I stepped outside, followed by falling slush. The overcast sky tinged the outdoors in a damp gray.

I walked across the parking lot, which was small like the airport.

It was thirteen miles to town. Too far to walk. I didn't want to get too far from the airport, anyway. My flight would board in a little over an hour. I stopped when I reached the sidewalk. I tried calling Dante, but it went to his voicemail. Where the hell was he?

I tried Noel next. Not like Valerie could stop me now. But Noel's phone went to voicemail, too.

My heart sped up. What if something had happened to them? Even if their vampire wasn't the right suspect, he was still a vampire, ergo dangerous.

I called my mom next and let her know when I was landing.

"Good. You're done then," she said.

Done? As though I'd ever be done.

It felt weird flying back home alone. I had an entire row to myself. This time I took the aisle seat. Didn't want to feel trapped or have someone from a full row nab the empty seat after takeoff. I don't think so!

I tried to look at UAA's class schedule again, but it was useless. I couldn't concentrate one iota. Then my iPod battery died halfway through the flight. It's not like I'd had time to recharge it in the middle of all the chaos.

I lay across the seats thinking, "I won't be able to sleep but at least I can rest." Somehow I managed to drift off. I was having one of those dreams where you feel yourself freefalling. I woke up with a jerk. The plane was descending.

I sat up and rubbed my eyes, then leaned over the seats and looked out the window. I saw mountains covered from top to bottom in snow. Back in familiar territory.

My mom wasn't waiting in the terminal or baggage claim. No surprise. Hopefully I wouldn't have to call her for a pick-up.

I yanked my duffle bag off the baggage carousel when it came around. The arctic wind blasted me the moment I stepped through the sliding doors to the sidewalk lining the arrivals lane. Mom's car was nowhere to be seen, but a black sedan waited out front.

The tinted window on the back door moved down and Melcher leaned forward. "Get in, Aurora."

I shot him a tight frown in response, hoisted my duffel bag further up my shoulder, and walked around to the passenger's side door.

Gee, thanks, Mom. Could have warned me.

"Are you taking me on base?" I asked after clicking my seatbelt shut.

"I'm taking you home, but first we're going to drive around a bit and talk." Melcher smiled. Since he always smiled, I had no way of telling if I

should take it as a sign of reassurance or one of displeasure—as in I was in big trouble.

I hated how the stress crept into my consciousness. Melcher's the one who sent me off with a psychotic vampire and defective informant.

The driver put on his blinker and rolled slowly forward. From behind, all I could make out was the collar on his blazer and dark cropped hair.

I watched a man greet a woman as she emerged from baggage claim. She dropped her suitcase and threw her arms around him. Behind the reunited couple, a man helped take a teenage girl's bags off her hands, giving her a warm welcoming smile. Why couldn't I be any of these other people?

The driver eased out of the arrivals pick-up lane. He turned left at the first major intersection—the opposite direction of home. At least it wasn't the route to the base, either. I had no desire to discuss things in Melcher's office, even if it did seem slightly sadistic to meet with me in a moving vehicle given the nature of my accident.

Melcher folded his hands in his lap. I saw his jaw move as he readied himself to speak.

"Jared's a vampire," I said.

Melcher showed no emotion except to lower his head as if in silent prayer. "That is correct, Aurora. Jared is one of the damned, but he is atoning for his sins."

Melcher knew. Why wasn't I surprised? "By killing humans and vampires at will?" I cried out.

"Humans?" Melcher lifted his head. He studied me with green eyes.

I squeezed my three middle fingers so hard the tips turned red. "I think he attacked Valerie in California and who knows how many other recruits."

"Did you and Miss Ward discuss this?" Melcher asked.

"No, but someone attacked her and then suddenly she's in Alaska undergoing training."

"And you assume Jared did this?"

"Did Jared recruit Valerie?" I asked back.

Melcher turned away. He cleared his throat softly. "That is a heavy accusation, Aurora."

"Yeah, well, I just witnessed him on a murderous rampage."

The driver took a sharp turn. I grabbed the door handle to keep from leaning toward Melcher. I looked out the window after the car straightened out. I knew this road. My mom, dad, and I once biked it to get to the Coastal Trail. Eventually we'd hit Point Woronzof Road. The last time I'd been out this way was with Fane.

This is where it had all ended.

It's where I'd gotten a glimpse of Fane the Vampire. Fane, the predator who chased girls through the woods. Fane, who would have bitten me if he hadn't been shocked to see bite marks across my skin after he ripped my scarf off.

But then he'd been so sweet afterwards. He'd answered my questions and given me space. He said he'd never killed anyone and I believed him. Even though he couldn't bite me, he still wanted to be with me.

I'd asked for time to think. He asked how much, and I'd countered with, "What do you mean how much time? You have all the time in the world."

That doesn't make the seconds away from you go by any faster.

What happened to that guy? The nice one? Vampires seemed to have a bit of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in them. Except in Jared's case. He was all Hyde.

"Jared was doing his job," Melcher answered evenly. "Something he told me you and Miss Ward failed to do."

That jerk!

"We were a little too busy defending ourselves to carry out Jared's command to execute an innocent girl."

Melcher started talking the moment I finished. "I assure you that Giselle Morrel is no innocent girl. Her killing spree has spanned the better part of two centuries, and now she remains on the loose."

Lovely. At least she hadn't seen our faces.

I straightened in my chair. "Maybe if you'd briefed us, we would have known what to expect. Better yet, maybe we wouldn't have freaked out if you'd told us Jared was a vampire and you were okay with that."

Melcher frowned. "Jared's status is classified. It appears he could have gone about things a little better, but if you had stuck to his plan, Giselle would have been put to rest and Miss Ward wouldn't have panicked and taken off."

Again, I supposed it should come as no surprise that Melcher didn't need to wait for me to arrive to have the full bloody scoop on what had gone down. Still, he'd better give me a chance to tell my version. Not that it looked like he cared much.

"So you've spoken to Jared?" I asked.

Melcher nodded once. "As soon as he woke up."

"I suppose you had him released."

"He's on his way back tonight."

I wrapped my arms around my chest tightly and stared out my window. The snow-covered trees and mountains across the inlet looked like a scene from a postcard.

Wish I weren't here.

"How did you pull that one off?" We'd left Jared in a house full of bodies practically holding a smoking gun.

Melcher glanced at me briefly. "I told the police what they needed to hear. Jared is an undercover agent who spent the last year tracking down a family with terrorist ties. He showed up to investigate and they opened fire. He had no choice. The girl got away."

How convenient—for Jared. "I'm afraid of him," I admitted.

Melcher did the head bob again. "You should be. He's one of the

infected but a necessary evil all the same. Jared started out as my top informant. He knows vampires from centuries back—all around the world. Even with the resources I have at my fingertips, I could never come close to identifying and tracking the vampires Jared has led me to. After he proved his loyalty to this unit, I promoted him to top recruiter."

My head snapped in Melcher's direction. "And it's never struck you as odd that *accidents* just happen to occur the moment he's around?"

"Accidents happen all the time," Melcher said calmly. "The world works in mysterious ways."

In other words, Melcher had granted Jared carte blanche. I glared.

"I'll look into it," he said. "I'll even put Jared on suspension while I do. I hold him responsible for last night's failures. As team leader, it was his duty to get the job done and return with every member of his team."

"What about Valerie?" I asked.

"I know that she took flight sixty-two to Sea-Tac International, which landed…" Melcher checked his wristwatch. "Twenty minutes ago. This isn't the first time a member of this unit panicked. She'll come back on her own or I'll send an escort. Miss Ward knows the rules."

That's just the thing. I was pretty sure Valerie was playing by her own rules now.

I leaned forward in my seat, feeling anxious for the driver to turn the car around and take me home. A shower would be nice. So would sleep. If I actually could sleep knowing Jared was on his way back.

"Have you called Dante and Noel back to town?" I asked.

"Dante and Miss Harper have come across some interesting information. I'm keeping them on stakeout for the time being."

I felt my shoulders sag. I wanted people I could talk to. I wanted my friends back.

"What about Mike?" I asked.

Melcher gave me the same blank look Jared had. This was really starting to unnerve me. "Jared claims he found Crist's cross at the Morrel house, but he didn't find any link to Mike."

"The case is closed, Aurora," Melcher said in one of his most clipped tones. "It was a double homicide and justice has been served."

"But how are they linked? The last time I saw Mike he was at Marcus's party."

Melcher sighed. "I am not at liberty to discuss the details, Aurora, but it is likely Agent Crist was patrolling around Marcus's townhouse the night of the party."

I relaxed my arms and fidgeted with my fingers in my lap. "Did she do that often? Go out on patrol? I didn't think she was a field agent."

"I am not at liberty to discuss Agent Crist's involvement in our unit, Aurora," he repeated. "Our work has its dangers. It's one of the greatest duties on the planet. At the end of the day, Agent Crist was privileged to sacrifice

her life in the line of duty."

I tapped my leg in agitation. And Mike? What about him? I doubted he'd consider it a privilege to die for no good reason before he got a chance to live his life.

According to Melcher, justice had been served. I still couldn't swallow it. Jared had said nothing about Crist or Mike when confronting Henriette and Andre. Wouldn't he have mentioned it? Maybe whatever past hang ups they had were more important in the eleventh hour than two more dead bodies.

I stopped tapping my leg. "Jared knew the Morrel's," I said. "They called him Xavier. He used to be married to Henriette."

"How do you know this?"

"I overheard them talking."

Melcher muttered something under his breath. His next words were as calm as ever. "Since you are already aware of Jared's connection to the Morrel family, there is no harm in filling you in on a few details. I feel at this point it would be worse not to."

Okay, so fill me in. I urged Melcher with my eyes.

He took a deep breath that came out like a sigh. "Back in the eighteen hundreds, Jared was a vampire in Paris. His name back then was Xavier. Henriette posed as his wife, Etienne and Giselle as their children, and Andre as Xavier's brother. They were body snatchers."

"Body snatchers?"

Melcher nodded. "Grave robbers. They dug up fresh corpses and sold them to medical schools for dissection."

I wrinkled my nose.

"A body snatcher could make over a thousand francs in a single night. A small fortune back then. But the Morrel's didn't stop at corpses. In their greed, they began murdering people then selling their bodies for even more profit."

I shivered involuntarily.

"This practice was known as burking, named after the Irishman and murderer William Burke. Victims were smothered and suffocated, resulting in a speedy death with no signs of violence. This also produced the freshest possible corpse. In an era without refrigeration, you can begin to understand how a steady supply of fresh corpses was in high demand among the medical community."

Yep, sounded like Jared all right. There it was again, that sick feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Melcher had a similar look of distaste on his face. "Xavier was caught and taken to La Force prison to await trial."

"What happened?" I asked, leaning forward.

"There was a cholera outbreak. Most of the prisoners died. Xavier did not."

"And then?"

"He was released."

I stared at Melcher, but he didn't continue. He could be really maddening at times—like *all* the time! He leaned forward and caught the eye of the driver in the rearview mirror. Melcher made a circular motion with his finger. The driver turned into the parking lot at Point Woronzof and looped around. "I'll take you home now," he said.

"Do I need to worry about Jared?"

"Once Jared has been debriefed I am sending him to the lower forty-eight. You have nothing to worry about, Aurora. I can terminate Jared at any time, and he knows it."

What? Like some kind of kill switch in his brain? It wouldn't surprise me. I bet Jared loved that. Maybe Melcher was the one who should watch his back.

"If you're up for it, you can go to school tomorrow." He flashed me a smile.

I wanted to graduate and all, but I would be lying if I said I wasn't dreading my return to West with Noel gone and Mike's letterman jacket still in my locker.

Maybe I could skip going to my locker the rest of the week. I only had two days to get through. I could make it.

"Aside from letting Giselle go, I want you to know you did well, Aurora. You didn't panic. You came home, and that says a lot about your commitment to the program. That is why I am happy to tell you that you've been approved for summer training once the school year ends. You'll even get to go out of state."

Did he really expect me to jump for joy over spending my summer stuck at boot camp? "Is this mandatory?"

"It's not only mandatory, it's a step up to official agent status. It also means you'll be eligible to mentor new recruits after you have a few more missions under your belt."

Just how many young AB negative people did they anticipate biting the dust each year? Is that why Jared was being sent away? To speed up the recruiting process?

I narrowed my eyes, studying Melcher's unblemished face. Did he believe in the cause enough to actually hurt young people in order to get them in the program?

Melcher kept smiling. "Don't worry. You'll do great."

"Where are you sending me?"

"I can't tell you that until it's time to go."

"Of course not," I said with a grumble.

"And we'll have you back in plenty of time to start your college classes." Melcher leaned toward me. "You did still want to go to college, didn't you, Aurora?"

"Yes."

He sat back. “Good.”

We drove back in relative silence. I turned my head away from Melcher and stared out my window. My breath spread across the glass in a fog that lingered then disappeared.

“What if Valerie doesn’t come back?” I asked while we waited for traffic to pass before turning onto my road. I glanced at Melcher. Not that I needed to. I could see the smile on his face in my mind before my eyes ever reached him.

“If she doesn’t come back, we’ll bring her back.”

I just hoped that wasn’t why Jared was headed to the lower forty-eight. I wouldn’t wish him on anybody. Not even Valerie.

As soon as Melcher dropped me off I sent her a quick text. I didn’t know why and I didn’t know if she’d even get it, but it was something I had to do.

Melcher knows which flight you’re on.

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17
It's Complicated

I woke up late Thursday. Well, to hell with school. One more day wasn't going to make a difference. As soon as I saw the time on my digital clock, I stuffed my head under my pillow. Third period could go on without me.

I bit the bullet Friday and went to school. I hadn't made it past third period when one of Mike's friends got in my face and yelled, "What happened to Mike? He said he was meeting you at a party and then he ended up dead!"

I cowered at the accusation in his voice. Me, Aurora Sky, vampire hunter let a high school boy intimidate her in the hallway.

"I'm so sorry," I stammered. "I don't know what happened."

"Well, he's dead because of you." Such hatred in those eyes. Boy did he know how to make an exit. He said his lines and left, leaving them to linger in my brain like a scar I was stuck living with for the rest of my life.

People in the hallway stared. Let them. This wasn't my high school. I had no friends here. I had no life. Just passing through.

I couldn't wait to get my goddamn diploma and get out.

At the end of the day, I waited until the school emptied out to open my locker. I swear that the small metal enclosure had become permeated with Mike's scent. I yanked his letterman jacket off the hook in the far back and wadded it into my hands.

Halfway down the hall I saw a big plastic wastebasket. I clutched the jacket to my chest then dropped it in the moment I stood over the trash bin. I looked over my shoulder. Why did it feel as though I was disposing of a body?

Outside, my mom waited at the curbside for a change. I got into the car and yanked the door closed behind me. "How was school?" she asked.

"Sucky," I said, staring out the front windshield.

"At least it's the weekend."

Yeah, so? I kept staring out the window. Mom did her loop around Benson Boulevard. "Taco Bell again?" I asked.

"I have a lot to deal with right now," she said defensively. Her voice went back to normal when she rolled down her window and ordered a taco salad, Mexican pizza, and nachos. "What would you like?" she asked in her even voice.

"I'm not hungry."

"You need to eat something."

"Maybe I should drink blood instead." Mom wasn't the only one whose mood was slipping. I felt myself going to a dark place. I'd been there before, and it never did me any good.

Mom added a bean burrito and a pink lemonade freeze to the order.

Right, cause I really wanted to drink something with the word “freeze” in it.

Once we were home I changed into my running gear. Instead of going through the woods, I ran down the street to the bike trail across the road. I had my ear buds in but no music playing. I jogged up to the corner were I’d had my accident then paced along the curve, staring at it from every angle.

I could still see it in my head: the frosted trees along the road, the oncoming vehicle, my dashboard, the windshield…then nothing.

I pictured Jared driving along a couple seconds later, happy to see another person about to lose her humanity.

“Another One Bites the Bust” by Queen started spinning through my mind.

I ripped my ear buds out, but it kept going. It was all in my head.

Mom had *The Vampire Diaries* on when I returned home. The pink lemonade sat on the kitchen counter where she’d left it, the slush slowly turning to liquid, condensation dripping down the side to form a wet ring. I took a shower, blew my hair dry, and stuck my ear buds in and listened to music while carefully applying makeup. Nothing too heavy duty. Just a bit of eyeliner, shadow, mascara, and lipstick. I left Dante’s bear claw in the top drawer of my nightstand.

I dialed Marcus and stared at my phone for several minutes before hitting send.

“Black beauty,” he answered.

I took a steadying breath. “Hi, Marcus. You wouldn’t happen to be throwing a party tonight?”

Marcus chuckled then stopped. “It’s Friday.”

I’m pretty sure that meant, *what do you think?* “Great, so you don’t mind if I show up?”

“Are you coming alone?”

Oh God, I didn’t want to have to talk about Mike. Marcus probably already had his hopes up. If I told him Mike had died after stopping by he might take it as a personal affront again and try to hunt down the offender. My lips twitched. It would serve Jared right if Marcus went after him. Jared had tried to pin it on the party host, after all. If anyone could take on Jared, I’d put money on Marcus. He’d killed Renard for abducting a guest. Jared had actually *killed* a guest—Andre.

“Yes.” But I didn’t plan on being alone for long.

Mom wasn’t too happy when I told her I’d called a cab so I could go “check on something for work.”

Or when I told her not to wait up.

I called Fane from the cab. I didn’t even hesitate. Valerie was right. It was time to wear the proverbial thong. I’m sure this isn’t what she had in

mind, but she'd skipped town and taken her threats right along with her. Not that it mattered anymore. Not if Melcher already knew about Fane and wanted him alive for information. Like Jared. I doubted Fane would work for Team Vampire Hunter if Melcher approached him. I'd just have to hope Melcher never gave him an ultimatum.

"Aurora Sky," Fane answered in his mocking tone.

"Hello, Fane," I replied back. "I'm just on my way to Marcus's. It would be great to see you again. I so enjoyed our last meet up."

"Are you drunk?" Fane asked suddenly, his voice changing.

"No, but I will be," I said, and hung up. I turned my phone off before dropping it inside my purse.

If Melcher could fraternize with vampires and bend the rules, so could I.

I threw my arms around Marcus as soon as I entered the palace. He let out a deep laugh and patted my shoulder. "Rough week, my pet?"

I nodded. "You can't begin to imagine."

"Come," he said, taking my arm. He escorted me into the kitchen, which had quite the gathering.

I hesitated but Marcus kept pulling. None of the faces looked familiar. There were a couple teenagers and some older twenty-somethings. Everyone looked clean cut and had dressed casual but nicely.

"Allow me to present Aurora Sky," Marcus announced.

I hoped my lips were smiling. They had a tendency to grimace all on their own when I felt uncomfortable. Luckily, everyone in the group introduced themselves, though I forgot each name the moment a new one entered my ears.

"Aurora is a student at West," Marcus continued. "She wants to relax after a long week."

"Relax? It's Friday night!" someone said.

I found myself laughing with everyone else. Probably just nerves.

"Will you drink a whiskey with us, Aurora?" a guy to the right of me asked.

"That sounds perfect. Thank you."

The boy turned to Marcus. "Gorgeous and polite. Where did you find her, Marcus?"

My face heated at being called gorgeous.

Marcus chuckled. "She found me."

"Lucky man."

"Tell that to Francesco," Marcus said. He left my side and joined a young man in the corner who began giggling the moment Marcus started speaking in his ear.

The boy poured two shots of whiskey and handed one to me. "Then I suppose we'll only be drinking whiskey together," he said, lifting his glass.

I hit my glass against his, careful not to spill.

Don't do it, Aurora. Not again. It never leads to anything good.

I threw back the glass and coughed.

The boy's eyes widened slightly at how fast I downed it. He chuckled then drank his in one fluid motion before refilling both our glasses. "What do you think?" he asked.

"It's disgusting."

He laughed and handed me the full shot.

"I like the way it burns, though," I said. Much better than pouring freezing slush down my throat.

I let the whiskey slip down my throat slowly this time.

Conversations resumed around us. It made me feel better now that I wasn't the focal point.

"What was your name again?" I asked the boy.

He grinned. "Thomas. You can call me Tom."

"It's nice to meet you, Tom."

Tom lifted the whiskey bottle and raised a brow. I nodded. "Thanks." I felt more relaxed with each sip. I did a lot better one on one than in bigger groups, and Tom seemed nice.

"How long have you and Fane been together?" he asked after we'd done another shot.

I felt warm inside. It felt good. I leaned against the counter. There were only two other people who'd lingered behind and that felt good, too. More room to breathe.

"Not long," I said, running my hand along the countertop.

Tom watched my fingers as I stroked the smooth black granite. "It's not like Francesco to leave his woman unattended."

"Yeah? Well, our relationship is complicated."

Tom looked me up and down, a glint in his eyes. "Giving Francesco a run for his money, are you?"

For some reason that made me laugh. Once I started it was hard to stop.

Oh yes. I was giving him a run for his money all right. The vampire and the vampire hunter. I began laughing harder.

Tom laughed too, thank God, so I didn't look like a madwoman laughing on my own. "Can I get you a glass of water?" he asked when we'd regained our composure.

"No thanks," I said, leaning more weight into the counter. "I feel good. Do you go to school, Tom?"

"Nah," he said with a wide grin. "I don't get nostalgic like some of these other vamps. High school sucked. Why would I go back for more?"

"That deserves a toast," I said, grabbing the whiskey bottle. I filled Tom's glass too quickly and ended up spilling on the counter.

"Don't worry about it," he said.

I stopped halfway on my glass to avoid a second spill. I lifted my shot. "To life after high school."

"The only kind of life," Tom said.

I managed not to spill as we clinked glasses.

"We should all go out sometime," Tom said after he finished his shot. "Movie night or something. Double date."

Double date? I nearly snorted whiskey out my nose. This felt surreal.

"Got any friends interested in meeting a polite young man?"

"My friends are in the dark about all this," I said. Better than admitting to being a loner. "Except Noel Harper. Have you met her?"

"Yes, I have. She's sweet on Gavin." Tom laughed. "Maybe I should enroll in high school."

"Forget that," I said. "Stick to your guns."

Tom poured us each another shot. I left mine on the counter. I felt warm and good-humored at the moment, and I wanted to keep it that way.

"What about you, Aurora? What do you have planned for life after high school?"

"College." Tom laughed with me.

"College and drinking?" he asked, raising a brow.

I wavered slightly. Definitely feeling the whiskey. I hoped I hadn't gone too far. "College and dancing. I love dancing. How come there's no dancing at any of these parties?"

Tom's eyes lit up. "You're absolutely right. There should be dancing! Come on." He grabbed my hand and led me to the living room. I stopped when Tom stopped on the edge of the sunken living room. "Marcus, Aurora and I want to dance."

Marcus turned away from the young man he'd been conversing with. I thought he'd show annoyance, but his lips lifted into a full grin. He clapped his hands twice. "Dancing! Excellent idea!" Marcus grabbed a remote off a speaker in the corner of the room. A moment later, "Ring My Bell" by Anita Ward began playing.

"Where's the disco ball?" someone yelled.

"Bedroom," Marcus answered.

We all laughed. Tom took my hand, and together we stepped down to the living room. The furniture and statues made it challenging, but we managed to groove in place, lifting our arms in unison to ring our "bells." Tom moved side to side with a goofy smile. It made me laugh.

I felt my limbs begin to loosen up.

A guy next to us snapped along with the beat. Just about everyone had started dancing. The whole room and everyone in it were rocking. I cranked my arm in the air.

Smiling, laughing, dancing—this is what I needed, not drinking.

I shimmied in front of Tom. He laughed and shook his arms in return.

"I think I was born in the wrong era," I said. I mean, how could anyone not enjoy themselves with disco blaring from the speakers?

The song ended too soon. "YMCA" by the Village People shot out of the speakers. The room erupted in laughter.

"Oh my God," I said.

Tom shook his head, his smile reaching all the way to his eyes. "Vampires."

"My party, my music," Marcus yelled over the singing.

I shrugged and began doing the YMCA. The Bee Gees "Stayin' Alive" cranked through the living room of the palace when Fane walked in and took in the scene. Marcus had gone into full John Travolta *Saturday Night Fever* moves. Fane looked more like John Travolta from *Grease* in his black jeans, black tee, and black leather jacket—and a sly smile on his lips. Somehow I doubted he'd start shaking his ass and grabbing his crotch.

Fane did remove his jacket in one smooth motion and toss it aside. It landed on the back of a chair. Way smoother than Travolta.

Fane walked up to Tom and me. Before I could say anything, he jutted his chin toward Marcus. "Now there's a sight I haven't seen in a long time."

"Not long enough," Tom said.

The guys laughed, but the way Fane looked Tom up and down was far from friendly. He glanced at me then back at Tom.

Tom stopped dancing. "Don't worry, Francesco. I didn't lay a finger—or tooth—on her." Tom shot him a cocky grin.

Fane looked at Tom with his own bemused smile. "Lucky for you." Fane turned to me. "Now that I'm here, what do you say we go somewhere a little less seventies?" He glanced at the spiral staircase leading to the rooms above.

"I'm all yours," I said in a flirtatious voice. "Tom, thank you for the drink and dance."

"My pleasure," he said. "Let me know if you ever want to hang out. Francesco has my number."

"Sure, why don't I give you Tom's number," Fane said under his breath as we walked away. "Shmuck."

I glanced over my shoulder. "I thought he was nice."

"Thomas? Thinks he's James Cagney."

I frowned. "Who?"

"James Cagney," Fane repeated impatiently. "American film legend." He made a sound of disgust in the back of his throat. "God, I'm getting old."

I chuckled softly. "No, actually, you aren't."

"Thinks he's James Dean," Fane tried again.

"Ah, *Rebel Without a Cause*."

"Exactly."

"What movies was the other James guy in?"

Fane's lips twisted in thought. I loved those lips. "*The Public Enemy*. *Angels with Dirty Faces*. *Love Me or Leave Me*. *Yankee Doodle Dandy*."

"Nope," I said, shaking my head. "Didn't see any of those in film class."

"Film class?"

"Yeah, I'm taking it with Noel."

Fane's lips curved. "I should tell Joss. It might motivate him to give high

school a try." He stretched his hand out for me to go up the staircase first.

I stopped abruptly, causing Fane to bump into me. I turned around, momentarily breathless when I found myself against his chest. "I need another drink." All that dancing had started sobering me up. I needed at least three more shots. I needed to be able to blame the alcohol if something happened between Fane and I. Something that involved tongues not teeth.

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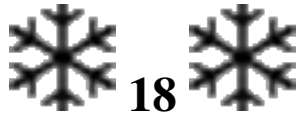

18
Step Three

"I see you're back in self-destruct mode," Fane said, staring at my throat when I threw back my first shot of whiskey.

"I'm just having fun. Don't I deserve to have fun?" I smacked the glass onto the granite countertop.

Gloria Gaynor began singing "I Will Survive" from the living room. Lately I felt like every song on the planet had been written specifically to mock my life. Aurora Sky: The Musical. One big bloody harmonic extravaganza.

Fane's gaze moved to my eyes. He stared. Okay, that wasn't unnerving. "Kill any vampires while you were away?" he finally asked.

"Actually, I saved one." Never mind that I'd probably live to regret it. If Giselle Morrel sniffed out any clue as to my involvement in her family's death I could have another Renard on my hands. Angry vampire hunting me down in Anchorage. My favorite kind. At least she didn't look that intimidating. I'd like to think I could take on a skinny blonde who collected stuffed animals and fairy figurines. Then again there'd been swords on her wall. Hmm.

"So now you've been transferred to vampire search and rescue?" Fane asked in a mocking tone.

I narrowed my eyes.

"Didn't think so," Fane said.

I poured myself another whiskey. "Want one?"

"Whiskey isn't my liquid of choice."

"Right," I said, rolling my eyes. "You prefer blood."

"Wine, actually." He backed against the counter and folded his arms low over his chest. I could feel Fane watching my eyes as I stared at the outline of his abs. He might have questionable hair and mismatched lips, but Fane's abs were rock solid and utterly dreamy in the dark. Not that I'd gotten a good feel recently.

"I owned a vineyard in France for many years," he continued. "Another life."

My hand stilled as I reached for the whiskey bottle. I recalled what Valerie had said about Fane having contacts all around the world. Had he known the Morrels back then? I had to force myself not to dig for more. *Not an informant. Not my problem.* Instead I asked, "If you enjoyed it so much, why did you leave?"

Fane stared at me a moment before answering. "It is one thing to spend a lifetime in the same place, another to spend an eternity."

"So you won't stay in Alaska?" My chest suddenly ached.

"Forever?" Fane chuckled. "I never stay in the same place for more than

fifty years. Sometimes less than five."

"So you're just going to keep going from city to city, country to country?"

Fane's eyes met mine. "It's worked out so far."

I reached for the whiskey bottle, but Fane grabbed it first. He moved away from the counter faster than I could've anticipated. "Hey."

He opened a cupboard and shoved the bottle inside. Then he pulled out a large glass and filled it with water from the tap. "Drink this," he said, handing it to me.

Something about the way he said it made me drink. Halfway through the water, I set the glass down. "I feel sick." My organs had started coiling in on themselves, or maybe the dancing, drinking, and water had all mixed together and reacted violently. I placed a hand on my abdomen.

"You should drink the rest of the water," Fane said calmly.

I made a face. "If I drink any more water I'm going to hurl."

"Good. You'll feel better."

I narrowed my eyes. "Do you enjoy watching me suffer?"

"Not at all." He sounded sincere. If I hadn't felt so sick all of a sudden, I would have wanted to kiss him. How humiliating. This wasn't part of the plan. The plan was to loosen up and feel sexy.

It hadn't worked with Scott, and it was failing dismally with Fane. I should have known better.

I eyed the glass of water. Even the thought of another sip caused my stomach to protest. I brought this on myself.

I grabbed the glass suddenly and chugged down the remaining water. My stomach rolled as though riding the waves of a storm.

I set the empty glass down shakily. "I'll be right back." I started toward the living room.

"There's one to the left of the front door," Fane said.

"Thank you," I said.

I hurried to the front entrance and shut myself inside the bathroom. I lifted the toilet seat, chanting in my head, *never again, never again, never again*. My stomach held on stubbornly. At this point, I felt so miserable I just wanted to get it over with. Saliva gathered in my throat. I spit into the toilet. It foamed on the surface of the water.

"How romantic," I said, and nearly burst into laughter.

There is no worse feeling than throwing up, except maybe the agony your stomach puts you through before you do it. At some point you're begging for it to be over, no matter what you have to go through to get to the other side.

Finally, my stomach let go. Luckily I found a bottle of mouthwash in the cabinet below the sink. I rinsed my mouth, splashed water on my face, and dabbed my cheeks and forehead dry.

The face in the mirror only looked half-human, but I felt as though I'd

returned to the land of the living.

Fane had his jacket on when I returned to the kitchen. If it had been any other guy I might have been humiliated, but this was Fane. We'd been together. We'd made out. Not for very long, but long enough to create something of a familiar bond between us—no matter how much he pulled back.

"Want to get out of here?" he asked.

"Yeah."

We didn't bother saying goodbye. I'm sure Marcus and the crew would survive without us. Ha, ha.

"How did you get here?" Fane asked when we stepped outside.

"Cab."

"Where's Noel?"

"I'm not at liberty to say." Right, so I totally lifted that line from Melcher.

"Noel trusts me, unlike you," Fane said, his words hard.

Ah, yes. Noel had spilled our little secret in a moment of panic, not that I wasn't grateful. If Noel hadn't shown up with Fane I would have bled to death after being gutted by Renard's evil crony.

But I had to admit, it was interesting how Noel's role of informant went both ways. Had she told Henry or Gavin? If Gavin didn't know already, I'm sure Valerie would fill him in. I didn't like the thought of that. Pretty soon every bloodsucker in the state would be onto us, and I wouldn't be able to cross the street without looking over my shoulder. Fine, so long as they all knew I hadn't signed up for this!

I followed Fane to his car, The Tank. After grabbing the handle on the passenger's side, I stopped and looked over the hood at Fane. "Noel panicked."

Fane shot me a lazy smile. "Noel knew exactly what she was doing."

I frowned and lowered myself inside the car. A feeling of nostalgia settled into the pit of my stomach as I buckled myself into the worn seat. "I see The Tank's still running."

Fane patted the dashboard and grinned. "She's managed to keep up with me so far."

It tugged at my heartstrings to see Fane flash one of his real smiles. His full upper lip looked so sexy when he did. When he smiled like that he came to life. He didn't sparkle (are you kidding me?), but he had this glow about him.

I stared at his slim, white fingers as he turned the keys in the ignition. Even now, the sound of a car starting caused a jolt of panic, but it no longer made me reach for the vehicle's handlebar.

Fane stared out the windshield as he asked, "Where to?"

"Surprise me."

He grinned and put the car in drive. Fane headed towards home but

passed my exit. He kept going south on the highway. His house then? That's what it looked like from the exit he took, but he passed his neighborhood. Denali High loomed in the distance. That feeling of nostalgia crept back inside me.

We approached the empty parking lot, lit from above by all the high-powered lights. The lot had been plowed, the snow pushed to the sides in hill-shaped mounds, forming walls on all four sides of the parking lot. It reminded me of a hockey rink.

Fane pulled in and put the car in park. We idled in the parking lot, facing the school.

"Do you miss it?" Fane asked softly.

"Why would I?"

"Someday you might." He held the steering wheel, even though we were parked. He kept staring straight ahead. Did he want a picture or something? It was a high school, not a castle.

Finally, he let go of the wheel and leaned back. "Going to school, hanging out with people, it helps me hold onto my humanity. I've seen a lot of my kind lose that. I had my life stolen from me, but I won't give up my humanity."

I tried to think of a response worthy of what he'd just said, but none of my thoughts seemed up to the task, so I remained quiet until the silence got the better of me. "Why did you bring me here?"

Fane turned to me and smiled. "Auto rehabilitation. We covered step one and step two, but we never made it to step three."

Speaking of genuine smiles, it had been so long since I'd truly smiled it made my jaw ache. I covered my mouth with my hand. "Oh my gosh."

"You didn't think I'd forget, did you?" Fane asked. "You've had plenty of time to practice step one."

Step one: Get inside the car.

Fane smiled when he saw my eyes on his lips. I was already thinking of step two: kissing. *"The surest way to get over a car phobia is by creating positive associations,"* Fane had told me.

My heart began thumping against my chest. It took all of my willpower not to wet my lips.

We'd had some epic makeout sessions in this car. I'd wanted more than kisses. Fane wasn't the only one who felt like he'd lost his chance.

"What's step three?" I asked, hoping my breath was steady.

Fane shot me a sly grin as though he'd known what I was thinking all along.

"Step three: drive the car."

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19
Memory Lane

I sat up straight in my seat. “Are you crazy?” The thought of driving still terrified me—as in cold sweats and mass panic.

Fane turned to me, resting an arm on the steering wheel. “Just around the parking lot. No one’s here, Aurora. And you can go as slow as you want. Five miles per hour if that’s what you’re comfortable with.”

I stared at the steering wheel. He made it sound so easy. Sweat gathered under my arms and I shivered. “I’m not ready.”

“The longer you wait, the harder it gets. Take the next step. Joss never got over his death and look how he turned out.”

My head snapped up. “Are you comparing me to Joss?” Fane’s roommate only happened to be the most sullen vampire I’d ever met. He chuckled in reply.

I surveyed the parking lot through the windshield. Patches of flattened snow gripped the pavement, but I couldn’t make out any ice. “Fine,” I said, unbuckling my belt. “I can drive from one end of the parking lot to the other if it will make you happy.”

“It’s not for me,” Fane answered with that same infuriating smile.

I scooted to the middle seat and shot Fane a pointed look. He grinned and opened the driver’s door. As soon as he stepped out, I settled into his place. He walked around the front of the car. Guess he trusted me enough not to run him over.

After I clicked my seatbelt in, I heard Fane chuckle again. Ignoring him, I pressed my foot down on the brake. I felt proud of the way I put the car in drive without hesitation. But as soon as I had it in drive, I froze. I pressed my foot firmly on the brake, and I jammed down so hard my leg began to tire. As I reached to put the car back into park, Fane touched my shoulder gently. “Aurora, let go.”

I took in a deep breath and nodded.

I returned my right hand to the steering wheel and squeezed. Slowly, I lifted my foot off the brake. It stayed in place, and I laughed with relief.

Fane chuckled. “She’s a tank, remember? You gotta give her gas.”

“Uh-huh.” I felt much better. I lowered my right foot slowly to the gas pedal, hovering right above. My heel touched the floor. I rested it there. Much more comfortable. Then slowly, I lowered the ball of my foot to the pedal. I barely touched it the first time. The car didn’t move. I laughed again. Nerves.

Fane said nothing as I hesitated each time I came close to pressing down. That’s the great thing about vampires. They have all the time in the world.

I took in another breath and straightened in my seat. Eyes on the parking lot. “All clear. All mine. No one but me. No big deal. Not at all. I can do this.

I can totally do this."

Fane played the gentleman and didn't comment as I spoke aloud.

I stared at the snow bank at the far end of the parking lot. Even if I somehow panicked and pressed down too hard, there would be a nice white mound at the end to cushion the blow. What was there to be afraid of? "Nothing but fear itself," I whispered.

I pressed on the gas pedal gently. The car moved forward. I took my foot off the pedal, and it rolled to a stop. A nervous laugh ripped through my lips. Fane remained silent.

I pressed down again and again, and the car moved forward. I pressed down harder. It wasn't fast. My eyes were on the pavement, not the speedometer, but we couldn't have been going over ten miles an hour.

A sense of exhilaration built inside my chest. I braked gently in front of the snow bank and put the car in park.

Fane and I sat staring at the wall of snow. I didn't care about the big grin on my face.

"See?" Fane said. "Like riding a bike."

"Yeah," I said, a bit breathless. "Well, if I ever need to get to one end of a parking lot to the other I'll be fine."

Fane laughed. "Now that you've made it from one end to the other, how about turning her around and making a full circle?"

I shook my head.

"No?" I heard Fane ask beside me.

"That's enough auto rehabilitation for today."

"Very well," Fane said. "I'll drive you home."

"No."

I was staring straight ahead into the snow bank so I didn't see Fane's expression, but I could see that he'd turned his head to look at me.

"You want to give it another go?"

If only he knew. "I don't want you to drive me home."

The only sound in the car came through the air vents. I kept my eyes forward, feeling suddenly shy. What happened to badass Aurora? The one who straddled Fane on the public bus? The one who pushed him back on the bench of this car and gyrated against his body while slipping him the tongue?

And what about Fane? Where was the tough talker now? He had to go and ruin things by being nice.

The silence was unbearable. The sound of my seatbelt when I unclicked it amplified in the quiet of the car. I paused a moment then scooted toward Fane. No turning back. Someone had to take the reins.

"Aurora." His voice stopped me.

"Yes?" I asked innocently. I turned and faced him.

"Not a good idea."

I frowned. "Why not?"

"You're a vampire hunter."

"I'm not hunting you."

"Do you have your knife on you?"

Did he really expect me to hang out in a house full of vampires without one? "Of course I have my knife on me."

Fane stared out the windshield at Denali High with all its interconnecting hallways. "If you can't trust me, this can't work."

"I don't trust anyone right now." I mean, take Melcher. I didn't trust him one iota. And he wasn't even a vampire.

"All the more reason why this is a bad idea."

"Then why did you bring me here?" I asked, waving a hand in the direction of my old high school. "Why are you picking up where we left off?"

"I'm trying to help you move on."

I sucked in a breath. Fane might as well have punched me in the chest.

"What we had was good," Fane continued. "Let's not ruin that."

Tears slipped down my cheeks. It happened so fast I never felt the moisture gathering in my eyes.

Why did my heart have to get all gushy over a vampire? If it broke apart it was my own damn fault. Vampire hunter, Aurora. Vampire *hunter,* not lover. God, I felt like such a fool.

I put my face in my hands.

"Aurora?"

"Just take me home." There was no masking the tears in my voice now.

I heard Fane move towards me then stop, hesitate, and pull back. The car door opened and closed. I took that opportunity to hurry and move over. I didn't want to be anywhere near Fane when he opened the driver's door.

He got inside the car. "If anything happened between us, you know you'd regret it in the morning."

I sucked air in through my nose and blinked rapidly. "You're the one who would regret it, not me, Fane. I'm not the one hung up on vampires. You're the one with the hang up!" I felt angrier as the words came out. "The moment you found out what really happened to me after my accident you treated me like I had the plague."

His lips twitched slightly.

"You think that's funny?" I demanded.

He straightened. Eyes narrowed. "There's nothing amusing about the plague."

Right, probably not the best analogy. It was possible Fane had actually caught the plague and now had to live with it the rest of his life. I wondered what kind of predominant symptoms vampires with the plague displayed. Maybe not the best time to ponder.

"I've never regretted our time together," I said.

"Haven't you?" Fane's words sounded like ice.

"When I broke up with you I was confused and scared for your safety."

"My safety?" Fane said with disbelief.

“There’s an entire unit of the government that exists to hunt down and kill people like you.”

Fane turned to me. “Then I guess it’s a good thing I have someone on the inside to look out for me.”

I swallowed. “There’s only so much I can do.”

“At least you don’t want to stake me.” He faced forward again.

Before I could answer, he put the car in reverse and made a sharp backwards u-turn. We faced the entrance. How many times had I driven out of this lot, happy to have completed another day in so many leading up to graduation?

The emptiness of the school grounds seeped deep inside me. I would still graduate, only not with my original class. The students at Denali High had felt as familiar to me as family not so long ago. Now I was the new loner girl who had gotten a boy killed. The tears pooled in my eyes again. I blinked rapidly. Better to wait and torture myself with these thoughts later inside my room with a box of tissues by my side. I wasn’t going to humiliate myself in front of Fane twice in one night.

We drove in silence the rest of the way. As Fane drove up my hill, he half-heartedly asked, “How are things at home?” to be polite. That’s all. I could hear it in his voice.

“Fine,” I said.

“Good.”

I figured I’d leap out of the car the moment Fane came to a stop in my driveway, but I didn’t. I sat staring at the dark house the way I’d stared at my old high school. “I asked my mom if I could move into my own apartment.”

“I can’t imagine she liked that.”

“It doesn’t matter. In another couple months I can start making my own decisions.” I reached for the door handle.

Fane stopped me by putting his hand on my thigh. “Aurora.” My heart responded with erratic beats. “It’s not that I don’t want to. Far from it. But deep down I know you’re not ready to cross that line.”

I pulled my leg away. “Good night, Fane.” I hurried out of the car. I didn’t want to hear another word from his mouth. I focused on reaching the front door.

Once inside, I went straight to my room, curled into bed fully clothed, and cried myself to sleep.

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20
Tastings

Dante finally called late Sunday night. So late I'd already brushed my teeth and gotten into bed to rest up before a full week back at Hell High.

"Finally," I said in place of "hello."

"I'm back, baby!" Dante said.

I propped my pillow against the headboard and leaned against it. "Melcher said there was some activity in Fairbanks?"

"We went panning and came up with gold," Dante said with barely contained excitement.

"Did it have anything to do with the death of Crist or Mike?"

"Melcher said you all solved that," he said. His voice dropped an octave. "I loved your last text, by the way. Almost as much as the other ones. Humor is highly undervalued in our line of work."

So he thought I was joking, did he? "I wasn't kidding."

"Really?" Dante didn't sound alarmed in the least.

"Yeah, really. Jared tried to kill Valerie and me, and now she's taken off."

The line was silent a moment before Dante said, "I bet she tries for France. She's got that French chic thing going on."

Not to mention the attitude. "Hopefully when the agents catch up to her they'll be as lenient as they were with you."

Dante had once split for Amsterdam. Lucky for him, the agents gave him a second chance to prove himself, otherwise he might be stuck working in some underground lab. I couldn't picture Valerie confined like that any more than Dante.

"So cool, Jared's a bloodsucker. Must be Melcher's secret weapon. Did he show you his fangs?"

I'd almost forgotten how nearly impossible it was to have a serious conversation with Dante.

"What made him go after you and Red? Did he skip a meal? Get hungry?"

"I don't know. He's denying it, of course." I sighed. "Things just sorta spiraled out of control."

"That's field work for you." Dante chuckled. "Well, I'm glad you made it back in one piece."

I rested my cheek against my shoulder and suppressed a yawn. "Me too. I'm glad you made it back, too. So you struck gold?" I didn't want to talk about Jared anymore. Not right before bed and not over the phone. This was a conversation Dante and I need to have face-to-face.

The excitement returned to his voice.

"If only you'd been there, Sky! We started out taking tabs on this dude, Buck, who was at that party you went to. Melcher's like 'This is a stakeout, no engaging with the enemy.'" Dante stopped to chuckle. "Anyway, we *accidently* bumped into Buck. He and Noel had their "Oh wow, what a coincidence running into you here" moment and next thing you know we're drinking brewskis together, chilling."

So while Valerie and I were being terrorized in Sitka, Noel and Dante were sitting back drinking beers in Fairbanks? Damn, why did I always have to draw the short end of the stick?

"That's only the beginning," Dante said, voice dropping. "So Buck's this good looking dude with an even better looking girlfriend—human. They start telling us how Nicole, the girlfriend, makes the big bucks working these ritzy vamp parties. Tastings, they call them."

I scooted up in my bed. "Tastings?"

"Tastings," he repeated. "Upscale shindigs for fancy pants vampires who like their blood laced with fine wine."

I shivered and pulled the covers up to my neck. "That sounds messed up."

Dante laughed. "And I didn't even have on my lucky bear claw. You still have it, right?"

"Right here in my nightstand."

"You should keep it."

"What?" I sat up straighter. It wasn't exactly a sapphire necklace, but it still felt a little too much like a boyfriend gift.

"I want you to have the claw. I don't need luck charms. I attract luck all on my own."

"Oh boy," I said, and laughed. "It's a nice gesture, Dante, but you earned it, not me." I cleared my throat. "So you were telling me about tastings."

"Right, tastings. There's this master organizer who sets these things up all around the state. It's more of a winter and fall thing. Buck said we lucked out because it was the last one of the season."

"Lucky you," I said, rolling my eyes even though Dante couldn't see.

"What did I tell you?"

"Let me guess? You attended the party."

"We did." His voice was filled with smug satisfaction.

"Just like that? You show up in town and they roll out the red carpet for a couple of curious humans who just happen to be passing through?"

"I didn't go as a human," Dante said.

"What does that mean?"

"I went as a vampire."

"Say what?"

"It was Harper's idea from the very beginning when we first approached Buck. I posed as her vampire boyfriend."

A big burst of air rose in my chest. It came out of my mouth as one big

gasp of a laugh. Better to laugh myself to sleep tonight than cry. “You’re kidding?”

“Nope. Harper ain’t squeamish. I’ll tell you that much.”

Harper? Dante’s use of Noel’s family name meant she’d earned his respect.

“And they bought it?” I asked.

“Well, I mean, I had to do some biting.”

“Dante!” I gasped.

“Hey, I was undercover. My hands were tied.”

I rolled my eyes. “And I’m sure you didn’t enjoy it in the least.”

“Don’t be jealous, Sky. You know I only have eyes and teeth for you.”

A chill went through me. “That’s not funny.”

“Come on, what did I tell you about humor being a key ingredient to this job?”

Right, humor and blood. Funny how Dante had brushed off my question of blood cravings and here he was biting people.

“Anyway, we attended the party, and I got on the list.”

“The list?”

“I’ll be receiving invites starting this fall to tastings around the state.” Dante pumped his fist in the air. “Can you believe that, Sky? You should have seen Melcher’s eyes light up. Damn! I should have asked for a promotion.”

“Congratulations,” I said sarcastically. “I’m glad you’ll have something to keep you busy. I plan on starting college this fall.”

“This won’t get in the way of school,” Dante replied.

“Of course not.”

“Melcher wants us working together again. They already think I’m a vampire. We just need to get the organizers to hire you as one of their wine girls.”

“And how exactly does that work?”

“The way Nicole explained it to us is that each girl is assigned a vintage. You drink several bottles, enough to knock you out, but not make you sick, lie on top of a bed in your designated room, relax, and let the vamps filter through one at a time sucking the wine from your blood. Bam! You poison them, I pop them.”

I gathered my blanket in my free hand while Dante spoke, squeezing the edge inside my tightening fist. “Why me?” Noel’s the one who made the discovery with Dante. She didn’t have the poisoned blood, though. Still, there had to be other vampire hunters Melcher could put on assignment. I wasn’t even twenty-one yet. I shouldn’t be drinking. Scratch that, I was done with drinking.

“Because Melcher wants the A-team on this one,” Dante said proudly.

“I don’t want to drink myself into a coma,” I said. “More importantly, I don’t want a bunch of vampires drinking from me. How many are we talking about anyway?”

"I don't know. Maybe fifty total?"

"Fifty!"

"Don't worry. There are strict rules about not overly puncturing the bodies. The vamps have to drink from the same watering hole, so to speak."

I let go of my blanket. An instant visual of a group of sexy male vampires licking and sucking my naked body flashed through my head. For some reason one of them looked like Jake Gyllenhaal. I shuddered, and it wasn't purely out of disgust. "And how much did you partake in these *tastings*?" I scrunched up my nose on the last word. That was something I couldn't and didn't want to visualize.

"I wasn't on the list at that point. I got to attend the party but wasn't allowed to sample any of the offerings. I mean, there is a limit. Can't have too many vamps sucking all the juice out of the women. Then there's the price to taste…fifteen hundred dollars."

"Fifteen hundred dollars!" If Dante wasn't exaggerating about the fifty tasters, that thing brought in seventy-five grand in one night.

"I told you we struck gold," he said smugly.

"You said you had to do some biting."

"Oh, that," Dante said and laughed. "Buck bit his girlfriend in front of us, so I bit Noel. I just sorta got caught up in the moment and went with it." He started laughing again. "We told him I was a newbie vampire. We all had a good laugh when Noel had to point out a vein. Buck insisted I give Nicole a bite. That was a couple nights before she got juiced up for the party. I wonder what wine-laced blood tastes like."

"Dante!"

"Buck says they should do a beer spinoff. October Blood Fest. What do you think?"

I groaned and rubbed my forehead with the palm of my hand. "I think I should go to bed and try and process all this in the morning."

"Good idea," Dante said. "Let it soak inside your brain a bit."

"Yeah, sure."

"Sooo," he said, changing his tone. "Are we going to talk about the sexting?" I groaned again. Dante chuckled. "Where are you right now anyway? Did I catch you in bed?"

"I'm not having this conversation with you."

"Don't get me wrong, I enjoyed your dirty little messages, but you know what's even better than texts? Phone sex. And know what's better than phone sex?"

"I'm hanging up!" I hit "end" on the call but not before hearing the rumble of Dante's laughter.

Right. Time for bed. I turned my phone off in case Dante had the bad idea to call me back. I pulled my pillow down and moved around, trying to get comfortable under the covers. Problem was, the moment I closed my eyes I saw myself lying naked, wearing only a black lace thong, atop a king-sized

bed with crimson sheets. Candles blazed from dozens of pillars surrounding the room, casting dark, sensual shadows against the walls.

My hair spilled over the covers as though it, too, was a shadow in the room. The cool, dry air touched every part of my body. I felt as though I'd slipped into a blissed-out state of relaxation.

A vampire stepped inside the bedchamber, moving slowly around the bed. He bared a striking resemblance to Tom, and he was on the bed with me before I knew it, crawling toward the center where I lay sprawled across the sheets. My nipples hardened before he reached me.

"Have you come to suck my blood?" I asked breathlessly.

"Blood is overrated." The Tom lookalike smiled seductively. He made his way to my legs. I felt his breath and then his tongue as he ran the tip from my thigh to my knee then back up.

The sheets rubbed against me when I squirmed.

Tom lifted his head and grinned before dipping back down. All I could see was the thick waves of brown hair at the top of his crown. His fingers brushed the thong's narrow strip of lace aside and then his tongue was on my clit, flicking and biting gently.

I nearly levitated from the bed, moaning as I did.

Tom looked up with a wicked grin before returning to his prize. I balled the covers inside my fists, thrashing from side to side. Tom gripped my thighs firmly and pushed his tongue inside me. I gasped and clutched at the sheets.

I turned my head and saw Henry watching us from the side of the bed.

"Henry," I rasped in surprise.

He leaned forward. "I have a confession to make, Aurora. I've been waiting for this moment since the night we met."

I swallowed. "You have?"

Henry nodded slow and sensually. He lifted his knee onto the bed, followed by the other. I felt the mattress dip down. "I've been waiting a long time to bite you."

"But you can't." I gasped when I felt Tom's tongue extend deeper. My eyes closed briefly. When I reopened them, Henry was on all fours at my side.

"Can't I?" he asked. He lowered his lips to my breast and bit down gently on my nipple.

Waves of heat shot through me. I cried out. My body stretched over the covers as though reaching for more.

Henry wet my other nipple with his tongue then blew gently on the tip. It tightened in response. Not to be outdone by Henry, Tom's tongue flicked inside me faster and faster. A blissful cry rose from my lips.

I lifted my head. The sight of Henry at my breast and Tom between my legs nearly drove me over the edge.

Then I noticed Fane. He stood leaning against the back wall, arms crossed over his chest, watching me. The moment our eyes met he smirked and shook his head. "You're not ready to cross that line."

"Don't listen to him." Dante stepped in front of Fane and walked to the foot of the bed.

Henry and Tom lifted and turned their heads simultaneously. "Hunter," they said in low, hostile voices.

Dante's grin widened. "Scram."

They moved aside, disappearing into the shadows of the room. Dante lifted a brow, flashing me one of his cocky grins.

My heart rate quickened when he climbed onto the bed and walked toward me on his knees. I could no longer see Fane. Dante suddenly filled the entire room. He straddled my legs, not stopping until he'd positioned himself at my hips.

"I know exactly what you want." Dante looked down at the bulge in his pants and grinned.

I propped myself up on my elbows. "Get over yourself."

His grin widened. "I'd rather get over you." He leaned beside my ear. "Over and inside of you."

A raspy breath left my lips at the same time my eyes rolled back in my head. *Fuck me, Dante. Fuck me hard.* I didn't have to say the words. He read my thoughts. Dante went for his zipper and this time I didn't clench.

I jumped in the shower first thing before breakfast the next morning. It looked like a rash had spread over my cheeks. I put on my clothes as soon as I'd dried off and stared at my reflection in the mirror while I yanked a comb through my wet hair.

You've got a sick mind, I told my reflection. *Sick, sick, sick.*

Once downstairs, I shoved a piece of bread into the toaster and poured myself a glass of orange juice. I pushed aside a stack of magazines on the table and took my first bite of toast.

On my fourth bite, I heard Mom shuffle down the stairs. "Good morning," she said, sleep clinging to her words.

"Good morning." I bit back into my toast.

She shuffled to the kitchen in her robe and slippers. After she prepared her glass of ice and soda, she returned to the table. Mom moved a stack of unopened mail aside so that she could take the spot in front of me.

I crunched down on each bite of toast. Mom sipped her soda, blinking the sleep from her eyes. She looked at me, looked away, then quickly looked back. "Are you feeling okay, sweetie? Your face looks a bit feverish."

"I'm fine," I answered, feeling my cheeks get hotter.

"Are you sure you aren't coming down with something?"

"Yeah." Nothing to worry about, Mom, just a case of crazed vampire lust. According to Valerie it couldn't be helped. Then again, maybe I was just a normal eighteen-year-old with raging hormones. At least I practiced safe

sex. It didn't get any safer than fantasy.

I grabbed my red scarf and wrapped it loosely around my neck before we headed out. Now that Mike's jacket was no longer in my locker, the sick feeling in the pit of my stomach wasn't as pronounced when I spun the combo on my lock. I still felt it when I went to history class.

During lunch hour I checked the library hoping I'd find Noel behind a row of bookshelves, but no such luck. I really *really* didn't want to check the cafeteria. If I saw Henry I might combust on the spot. How could I have a normal conversation with him without blushing my cheeks off?

Guess I'd have to wait until film class to see Noel. I took my sack lunch into an empty classroom and pulled out a peanut butter sandwich. Bread and peanut butter was starting to get old. I'd spread a thin layer of blueberry jam on it to try for a different taste. I usually went for strawberry or raspberry. As I ate, I started on my class readings. I hadn't missed too much the week before.

As usual, I went to film class early. I hoped that today Noel would, too. She didn't. In fact, she didn't show up at all. Weird. Dante was back in town, which meant Noel had to be back. She probably felt tired, but I wouldn't think she'd want to miss any more school.

As soon as school ended, I tried calling her, but it went to voicemail. I sent a text while I waited by the pick-up lane in front of the office.

Hey. Missed you at school. Everything OK?

When I looked up, I saw my mom parked along the curb. I stuck my phone in my pocket and made for the car.

"Hi, honey, did you have a good day?" she asked before I'd buckled in.

"Yeah." It took me a moment to notice that she'd put on a pair of jeans and a nice sweater. "You look nice. Is Dad coming over?"

Mom sniffed. "I haven't heard a word from him."

What is it then? A date? My mom didn't appreciate jokes like that so I kept it to myself. I didn't have to wait long. Mom had never been the secretive sort, except when it came to Agent Melcher. "Your grandmother called."

"Oh?"

"She arrives in Anchorage this Thursday."

I turned in my seat. "Isn't that a bit early?" Like two months early. After Gramps retired, he and Gran became snowbirds. Unfortunately, Grandpa didn't stick around very long to enjoy his retirement, but winters in Florida certainly agreed with Grandma. She'd made a vow never to set foot in Alaska before the month of May.

Mom nodded solemnly. "You know how she likes to meddle. She thinks I'm in need of her advice."

"Can't she give it over the phone?" I loved Gran and all but in small doses. When she smelled trouble I swear she made it worse.

"She's given me an earful over the phone for hours every day," Mom said tightly. "Now she's on a mission to straighten out this mess with your dad."

I nearly laughed. The only thing Gran would do is send Dad running for the hills. I was so lost in thought I didn't notice Mom pass up the fast food chains until we were halfway home. I almost said something then decided against it.

The moment I walked into the house I felt a sense of space and order. The countertops were cleared, the carpets vacuumed, everything was put in place and clean. Mom had gone to town.

A feeling of panic shot through me. "Gran's not staying here, is she?"

I swear my mom's look of horror mirrored my own. "No. No. Thank God."

"Okay." My shoulders relaxed. Guess it was a good thing I hadn't talked my mom into letting me live in Grandma's apartment. I'd be moving right back out. My mom had her issues, but she left me alone for the most part, unlike Gran who got her kicks giving orders. As if I didn't get enough of those in my life.

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21
Boyfriend Material

Noel didn't return to school Tuesday or Wednesday. Nor did she return my calls or texts. By Thursday I'd stopped expecting her and that's when she walked into film class and slid into the seat beside me without a word.

"Hi," I said.

Noel turned her head slowly. "Hey."

That's it? Hey? "You never returned my calls," I said.

Noel studied the surface of her desk. "I'm sorry. I had family stuff to deal with."

I didn't know much about Noel's family since she always shied away from the subject. I only knew she didn't live with her family. "I hope it wasn't anything too serious," I said. It wasn't exactly my most hospitable voice, but I felt hurt that she didn't trust me enough to talk about it.

She merely shrugged and stared sullenly down at her desktop.

My parents are getting a divorce! I wanted to yell. *My drill sergeant of a grandma gets in this afternoon, and I get to spend the rest of senior year being bossed around whenever she's near.*

Noel wasn't the only one with family problems. If she didn't want to talk about it, neither did I. So maybe I was being overly sensitive. But I thought we were friends. More than friends—blood sisters.

Noel took out a spiral notebook and began tracing the letters of her name over and over.

"Dante said things went great in Fairbanks," I said.

She stopped tracing. "Yeah, we got some good leads," she said without looking at me. "He asked a lot of questions about you."

I momentarily forgot Noel's sulky behavior. I wanted to ask what kinds of questions but I resisted the urge. Two could play the silence game. I pulled out my own notebook and straightened it on top of my desk.

Mrs. Campbell walked in and glanced at the big round clock on the wall.

"How did it go in Sitka?" Noel finally asked.

I snorted. "Jared tried to kill us and Valerie took off." I enjoyed seeing the shocked look on Noel's face right as the bell rang.

Mrs. Campbell walked to the front of her desk. "Last week we watched *Apocalypse Now*. Today we will be watching *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse*, Eleanor Coppola's documentary about the making of the film."

Noel and I faced forward the rest of the period. As soon as the bell rang at the end of class, Noel turned to me. "I'm sorry I didn't return your call sooner. Things have been…well, crazy, but it sounds like you've been through all kinds of crazy, too. Can we talk after school?"

So now she wanted to talk? “Can’t, my grandmother’s coming to town.”

“Tonight?”

“She’s staying with us all evening. What about tomorrow night?”

Noel looked at me funny. “Are you going to Marcus’s?”

“The palace? I’m done with that scene.”

Noel nodded once. “Well, call me when you’re available, I guess.”

I accompanied Mom to the airport to pick Grandma up. We waited in the terminal until Gran walked out holding an oversized aqua purse. She wore khaki capris and a silk scarf tied fashionably around her neck.

She stopped in the middle of the terminal when she saw us and threw out her arms. “My darlings!”

Oh, and dramatic, too. Sometimes I wondered if Mom and I were really related to her.

“Hi, Mom,” my mom said, walking up to Gran and giving her a hug. “Did you have a good flight?”

“Every year I forget how long it is,” she answered. She turned to me. “And let’s take a look at my granddaughter. Oh my, you’re so pale.” She turned to my mom. “The two of you should come out and see me more often.” Gran took both our arms and steered us toward the escalators leading down to baggage claim.

She pointed out her luggage as it passed on the carousel. I pulled each of her three heavy suitcases off. I took two, mom took the extra one, and we rolled them through the terminal. Grandma froze in place as soon as we stepped through the sliding doors into the parking garage. “Oh dear,” she said.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I’d forgotten how cold it was this time of year.” She shivered for emphasis.

I laughed.

“I told you to wait until summer,” Mom said.

“My dear,” Grandma said, turning to my mom aghast. “You wouldn’t have lasted the spring without me.”

Welcome home, Gran.

She wanted to drop her things off and freshen up at her apartment first. I still found it comical that I’d tried to snag the place for myself. Grandma had her own vehicle she kept garaged during the winter. She said she’d drive herself over for dinner.

“Are you sure?” Mom asked.

Grandma gave her a look of exasperation. “I will see you at five.”

Mom sighed when we got back inside the car.

“I’ll help you make dinner,” I said.

“Thanks.” Mom didn’t usually want my help. I think today she wanted

company more than the actual help.

The moment we returned home I got to work on the mashed potatoes. Mom was on her own with the turkey. We'd stopped at the bakery for a loaf of fresh bread and lemon meringue pie—Grandma's favorites.

"I don't know how she eats like this and stays skinny," Mom said, setting the temperature on the oven.

I stood at the sink, scrubbing the potatoes. "I'm guessing it has something to do with her inability to sit still. She's probably the only seventy-two-year-old whose metabolism hasn't slowed down."

Mom laughed and then nodded at the potatoes. "You know she doesn't like skins."

"That's where all the nutrients are." Plus it meant I didn't have to peel them. "You can blame it on me if she complains."

Mom sighed and got the turkey out of the fridge. Once the potatoes were clean, I got started on a chopped salad with lettuce, celery, apples, and walnuts.

She surveyed the kitchen. "We're going to have a lot of food for just the three of us. Maybe you should invite Dante."

I didn't grimace the way I would have before. A smile crept slowly over my lips. "I'm sure Gran would *love* that." She was something of a flirt—a charming one, at least, not the embarrassing kind.

Mom and I looked at each other and started laughing. "I think I'll save Dante for another night. Who knows what Gran's got up her sleeve?"

Mom nodded thoughtfully. "Good point."

It was a good thing I didn't invite Dante. Grandma arrived full of energy and ready to draw up battle plans as I suspected. I tried to stay out of the conversation as much as possible. It was up to Mom to stick up for herself. Gran had surprised us both by urging my mom to sign the divorce papers and move on with her life. Her advice could have swung in either direction, and for some reason I thought it would swing in favor of a fight to win Dad back. Grandma did love herself a battle. But that's not what she said after passing the salad bowl to me.

"He's obviously moved on. It's high time you did the same."

Mom's jaw dropped. "You think I should give up on twenty-one years of marriage? How can you say that?"

"Honey," Gran said, lowering her fork. "Things between you and Bill haven't been good for a while. The first thing you ought to do is put this house up for sale. It's much too big for just the two of you, anyway. Soon there will only be you."

Mom pushed her food around her plate with her fork. It was a real shame she couldn't enjoy the fruits of her labor.

"Aurora, why aren't you eating any turkey?" Grandma asked suddenly.

"She doesn't eat meat," Mom answered for me. I appreciated the firm tone of her voice, especially since my mom had never been a big fan of my

eating choices.

"Since when?" Gran demanded. She turned back to me, sucking in a dramatic breath. "My dear, I didn't want to say anything before, but you do look rather sickly since the last time I saw you."

"Well, it is the middle of winter," I said. I'd always been better than my mom at answering Grandma's jibes. My diet was the same as it had been last summer. Grandma hadn't noticed anything to complain about then, well not with my looks anyway.

Thankfully, Grandma let me off the hook. "Yes, winter is dreadful. Don't remind me." She turned back to my mom. "It's simply no good staying in this house. Until you move out, you can't move on."

Mom sat listening with a frown on her face for most of it.

Before Grandma left for the evening she invited us out for dinner the next evening. More of a summons, if you asked me.

Noel wasn't at school Friday. What the hell was going on with her? If she had something she wanted to tell me, it was up to her to make a move. I'd already left several messages and texts while she was out of town and more when she hadn't showed up to school at the beginning of the week. It was hard not to take personally.

Rather than make Mom drive to midtown twice, I walked to Gran's townhouse after school.

"Aurora!" Gran cried as soon as I made it to her front door after being buzzed inside the building. I stepped into her arms and hugged her then stepped back.

"Hi, Gran."

"Come in! Come in! How was school?"

I shrugged. "They haven't kicked me out."

She hooted with laughter. Our best bonding moments involved humor. I followed her into the open kitchen. "I made us some snacks."

I liked the way Grandma said "made" to describe the store-bought cookies she had arranged on a ceramic platter. Mom hadn't inherited her love of cooking from Gran, that's for sure.

"Thanks," I said, taking one to be nice.

"Can I get you something to drink?" she asked. "A Red Bull or Mountain Dew?"

"Uh, water's good."

Gran got a glass out of the cupboard and handed it to me. "I'm going to have a Red Bull," she said.

I held my glass under the faucet and filled it with tap water.

"I'm glad you came over early so just the two of us girls could talk," Gran said. She opened her Red Bull and drank from the can. "Shall we get

cozy in the living room?"

I nodded and followed her to the white sofa overlooking Westchester Lagoon. That's where they'd found the pizza delivery boy. If only Gran knew what my life had been like since she last left.

"Your mother tells me you're still not driving," Grandma said.

I felt my defenses rising. Here we go. "I'm not ready," I said.

"You're not ten anymore, Aurora. You shouldn't need your mother to drive you around."

I forced myself not to glare or sound petulant. Gran was just being Gran—stepping on toes and butting in where she didn't belong. "She won't have to for long. I'm going to live on campus as soon as I graduate."

Gran jumped on that immediately. "What happened to Notre Dame? I cannot for the life of me understand what made you give that up. You can't mean to stay in Anchorage and babysit your mother. I can tell you right now it won't do either of you any good."

Grandma sounded pretty fired up, more than usual. My jaw ached from clenching my teeth together. It's not like I wanted to stick around, not that she had any clue of that.

"My mind's made up." I didn't know what else to say.

"I just don't understand it," Gran said, shaking her head.

I watched her take a sip of her energy drink. "I'm not staying for Mom," I said before thinking out my next words. "I'm staying for my boyfriend."

Gran's eyes lit up when she faced me. She'd worried on more than one occasion about what she viewed as my lack of interest in the opposite sex. Apparently a boyfriend held more value than a top-rated college.

"Tell me about this boy," she said, her voice rising with excitement. "What's his name?"

"Dante," I said without thinking twice. Maybe his name came so easily because this was the second time I'd used him as a fake boyfriend. That ought to concern me.

"And his last name?"

"I don't know. I don't think he has one."

"Everyone has a last name," Gran said, some of the chiding returning to her voice. "But never mind that. Is he handsome?"

"Extremely."

She let out what sounded like a squeal. If she didn't have a beverage in her hand, I swear she would have rubbed her palms together. "I insist he come out with us tonight."

"I can see if he's available."

"Why don't you call him right now?"

"Okay," I said. "What time and where?" It was better to sound perfectly confident in front of Gran.

"Five thirty at the Crow's Nest."

Speaking of crows, Gran had the whole early bird eating thing going on.

Plus, she hadn't adjusted to the time difference yet. Five thirty in Anchorage was nine thirty in Florida. No wonder she was chowing down on cookies and chugging an energy drink.

I pulled my phone out of my coat pocket, smiling inwardly as Gran watched. I bet she thought I was bluffing. I dialed Dante. He answered immediately. "Oh good, we didn't get a chance to finish our conversation the other night. I think your phone died."

"Right," I said, laughing softly.

"I believe we were talking about sex in all its forms: written, verbal… physical."

I cleared my throat. "Dante, my grandmother is in town, and she'd like to take you, me, and my mom out to dinner. Five thirty at the Crow's Nest. Can you meet us?"

"That's early."

"Gran's on Florida time." I looked at my grandma. She gave me a big smile.

Dante chuckled. "Well, you know me. I can always eat."

I found myself smiling into the phone. "I know."

"Tell your grandmother I would be delighted."

I lowered the phone. "Dante says he'd be delighted."

If anything, Gran only looked more pleased. I lifted the phone back to my ear. "Right answer."

Dante laughed. "Then I'll see you soon…in the flesh."

I shivered slightly. "Yep. See you soon."

Grandma set the can aside while I said bye. Now she really did rub her hands together. "Oh, won't this be fun!"

"I hope you like him."

"I know I will. He obviously has good taste to go out with you."

I felt my cheeks warm. "Gran…"

"What? It's true." She got up and headed back to the kitchen. "Do you want another cookie before I put them away?"

"I still have mine, thanks." It sat uneaten on a coaster on the end table by the couch. "Need help?"

"No, dear, I'll have this cleared in a jiffy."

While Gran put the cookies back inside their boxes, I sent Dante a text.

One more thing. My grandma thinks you're my boyfriend.

Dante texted back a moment later.

No problem, kitten, but this time it's going to cost you.

? I sent back.

You know what.

I sucked in a breath as I stared at the screen on my phone. I waited to see if he'd say anything else, but he didn't. I quickly put my phone away when my grandmother rejoined me in the living room. I could feel my cheeks heating again, as though I'd been caught looking at a dirty magazine in my

grandmother's living room.

"I cannot wait to meet this Dante fellow," Gran said. "He sounds like quite the gentleman."

I nearly snorted, but recovered quick enough to nod. "He makes me laugh."

Gran took a seat in the recliner and leaned back. "Humor goes a long way, my dear."

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22
Always Leave Them Wanting More

Gran wasn't the only one pleased about my newfound boyfriend. As soon as she'd been buzzed in, Mom went right along with it when Grandma asked why she'd never mentioned Dante before.

"They just started going out," Mom answered, giving me a quick questioning look.

Gran did the squeal thing again. "Oh, isn't it wonderful I came home early? Now tell me everything there is to know about Dante."

"He's a freshman at UAA," I said.

"Already in college," Grandmother noted, raising a brow. "Well done, my dear."

"You'll love him," my mom said. "He's entertaining, well-mannered, and extremely good looking."

"Mom!"

She smiled. "What? It's true."

And so the conversation went the entire drive downtown. Dante won extra points for, as my Mom put it, having a hearty appetite the one time she asked him to stay for dinner. Of course, what we both left out is the reason behind that first visit. Dante had arrived on our doorstep to introduce himself as my vampire hunting mentor then haul me off to Fairbanks for my first mission in the field with no warning.

"Is that him?" my grandmother asked suddenly when my mom drove down a side street beside the Captain Cook Hotel looking for a parking spot.

And there stood Dante, waiting in front of the hotel's double doors, dashing grin upon his face. He looked like a young, clean-cut Brad Pitt, only better.

Dante wasn't just winning points with my mom and Grandma. From the moment I landed eyes on him I liked what I saw, but there was more to it than that. Dante made me smile. He made me laugh. Wasn't that better than a guy who made me cry?

And he was reliable. No question. He came out tonight because I asked him, and here he stood, waiting at the entrance with a big welcoming smile.

I felt a pitter-patter inside my chest. Oh yeah, there was a definite attraction going on between us. Our first face-to-face since the whole sexting thing in Sitka had my nerves deep-fried and sizzling.

As we got out of the car, Dante approached, his cheeks dimpling as he smiled even bigger. "Mrs. Sky, it's been too long." He walked right up to my mom and hugged her.

"Hello, Dante. It's good to see you again." Mom was all grins. I swear this was her dream come true for me. She took a step back and looked at

Gran. “Dante, this is my mother, Abigail Williams.”

“Mrs. Williams, I am delighted to meet you.”

“Oh, the pleasure is all mine,” Gran said. Dante reached out his hand, but Grandma took him in her arms. “Let’s have none of that. You’re family now.”

Luckily no one saw my face. I felt ready to burst into laughter and give us away. I doubt Gran would be thrilled to watch me erupt into hysterics. I bit my tongue. Hard.

“And there’s my girl,” Dante said energetically, honing in on me. His lips quirked upwards. He’d seen the laughter on my face.

“Hey,” I said casually, trying not to look too amused by the situation. I had to admit it was much more entertaining than awkward. That is until Dante stepped up to me, dipped me back, and kissed me full on the lips.

My eyes widened. Dante made sure to get what he could out of the kiss before lifting me back up. He smirked the moment he took in the dazed look on my face. Before I could think of anything to say, he offered his arm to my grandmother and launched into a conversational tone. “Aurora tells me you came in from Florida, Mrs. Williams. How long are you visiting?”

“Call me Abby, dear. I have a place in midtown where I stay six months out of the year.”

“Ah, so you’re a snowbird. Can’t say I wouldn’t mind taking off south myself when the big freeze comes in.”

Gran squeezed Dante’s arm. “You and Aurora must visit me next winter.”

“We’d love to.”

Mom and I fell into step behind Dante and Grandma. Mom raised a brow at me and I shook my head. She answered with a smile.

Our small group tromped through the lobby up to the elevator. Inside the elevator Dante pressed the button for the restaurant on the top floor, then took a place beside me.

When we reached the top floor he held the elevator door open. My grandmother stepped out first. Before following Mom out, I leaned back and whispered to Dante, “Thank you for doing this.”

“Anytime. Shall we?” Dante reached for my hand. When our fingers laced together, it felt like the most natural thing in the world. We walked down the corridor toward the restaurant’s lobby. Mom glanced back at us and smiled.

I should have known Grandma wouldn’t let Dante off the hook completely. “What’s this I hear about you keeping my granddaughter behind to attend an in-state college?” she asked after we’d been seated.

Dante didn’t miss a beat. He smiled slyly. “Couldn’t let her run off east and fall in love with another man.”

Gran looked Dante over closely. “Aurora must think highly of you to stick around Anchorage.”

He chuckled. “You know what they say. Who needs a dream college

when you've got your dream man?"

I smacked Dante playfully on the shoulder. "And so humble."

Gran looked between the two of us and smiled. "I can't say I was too happy when Aurora told me she no longer planned on attending Notre Dame, but at least now I can begin to understand why."

Dante may have gotten the Abigail Williams stamp of approval, but that didn't absolve him from the background check. Gran asked about his family, education, and upbringing in Fairbanks.

Dante and I didn't get much chance to talk, and maybe that was a good thing. I did try to ask him about Noel at the end of dinner as my mom and Grandma gathered their hats, gloves, and jackets.

"Did something happen in Fairbanks that upset Noel?" I asked.

"Harper? No, why?"

"She's been acting withdrawn at school."

Dante looked up in thought. "Nope, can't think of anything. She seemed fine to me. Way peppier than I've ever seen her."

"Hmm."

"Why don't you just ask her what's up?"

"Because that's not how women do it," I said, exasperated.

Dante squinted at me. "Why not? Seems a heck of a lot easier."

"Come on," I said, grabbing his arm. My mom and grandmother are waiting."

Dante put a hand on top of mine. "Why don't I drive you home?"

Alone with Dante. I'd done it plenty of times before and felt perfectly safe but that was before the sexting and his starring role in my erotic fantasy, and the pretend but oh-so-real-feeling relationship and date out with my family.

I felt the tremble even in my fingertips. I hoped Dante didn't.

I cleared my throat. "My grandmother just got into town and is expecting Mom and me to come over for a while. Not to mention she's going to want to have me around so she can gush over you."

Dante straightened up and smiled. "Well, in that case." He chuckled. "You know, Aurora," he said slowly, "if your grandma's going to believe the whole us being an item story, it would be much easier if it were true."

I gave him a hard stare.

"Am I not good boyfriend material?" he asked when I didn't answer.

"You're great boyfriend material," I said quickly. "But we work together."

Dante grinned. "That's what I call a bonus. Come on, Sky. Let me take you out on a date. A real date."

"A date," I repeated slowly. The guy I'd been fantasizing about was asking me on a date.

"Sky," Dante said, low and seductive.

"What?"

"You're blushing. That means you want to say yes."

I looked him in the eye. "Fine. One date. It can't be more dangerous than a vamp mission, right?"

"In my case, biting is optional."

I groaned. "I'm so going to regret this, aren't I?"

Dante lowered his voice. "I guarantee you'll love every minute."

A shudder ran through my body. I pulled my hand away from his and hurried to catch up to my mom and grandma in front of the elevators.

Dante was all smiles when he joined us. "Mrs. Sky, Abby, dinner was delicious. Thank you for inviting me."

"Of course, Dante," Gran said. "I hope to see a lot more of you in the coming months."

"Well you won't see much of me," I responded. "I still need to survive the last couple months of high school."

"That's right," Dante said. "We want Aurora to graduate and join me at U of A. I look forward to many late-night cram sessions."

Gran tittered. I didn't doubt she caught Dante's double meaning. I felt that familiar wave of heat rush over my body.

Dante walked with us to the car, opening the door for Gran. "It was so lovely to meet you, Abby."

"Where are you parked, Dante?" Mom asked.

He grinned at her over the hood. "I'm on the other side."

"We can take you around."

"That's okay, Mrs. Sky. I don't mind walking."

"Well, it was so good to see you again," she said.

Mom got inside the car, leaving me beside the passenger door next to Dante. He raised a brow. "Kiss goodbye?"

I looked sideways at the car then back at Dante, my heart doing a flip-flop. "Only because my grandmother is watching."

"Right," Dante said, a big smile on his face as he stepped up to me.

His expression turned serious as he stared at my lips. I thought he would have rushed in for the kiss before I changed my mind. Instead, he set my nerves buzzing as he stared down at me, inches from my face. I took in shallow breaths. He leaned in slowly with the sort of dark expression that made me shiver all over.

Our lips met.

He'd taken me off guard with the first kiss. This time it was like he wanted me to anticipate what was coming, and dangle it in front of my face like a carrot in front of a horse.

Two could play that game.

I moved my lips over Dante's, tilting my head as needed to change the angle, adding pressure. I was much more confident about my kissing skills thanks to Fane. My heart accelerated when I heard his intake of breath. I pulled back and shot Dante a grin. "Good night, lover."

“Oh, you’re bad.” Dante said. “You know this isn’t over.”

I chose to smile rather than answer. I got inside the car, shutting the door gently. As my mom pulled away, I glanced over my shoulder and saw Dante still on the curb watching us go.

“Well, my dear,” Gran said from the front seat. “I can see why you’ve elected to stay in town. You’ll need to keep an eye on that one.”

I glanced over my shoulder, but Mom had already put downtown behind us.

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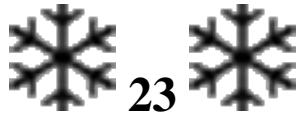

23
Survival Instincts

I should have known Gran would be back at it when she came over for dinner Saturday night. At least we were eating Thursday night's leftovers and only had to reheat stuff. Gran had arrived early and watched Mom and I as she sipped an iced tea.

"You really need to get behind the wheel again, my dear," she said. Yep, she was back on me about that. "Look at me. I'm driving around at seventy-two."

When my back was to Gran, I rolled my eyes.

"Aurora will drive when she's ready," Mom said.

"That fellow of yours might get tired of picking you up and dropping you off all the time," Gran said, switching tactics. "A man likes a woman who's independent."

"There's always the bus," I said cheerfully.

"The bus?" Gran sounded horrified. Her expression made me chuckle. "Oh, dear. Oh my. Have you seen the depot downtown? I would be scared for my life."

"I don't ever go downtown, Gran."

"Well that's a relief."

Mom surprised me by saying, "After graduation we'll look at student housing on campus."

I stopped tossing salad. "We will?"

She nodded.

"Oh, Mom." I felt tears in my eyes. I dropped the salad spoons in the bowl and threw my arms around her.

She chuckled and rubbed my back. "It's what makes the most sense."

I wiped the moisture under my eyes with my fingers after I pulled back. I could feel the grin all the way up to my nose.

Grandma clapped once. "Now that that's settled we can decide what to do about the house."

I saw Mom's smile drop from the corner of my eye.

"I told you, I'm not selling the house."

"You should move in with me. We can take long walks on the coastal trail. It's just what you need."

Mom's back was to us as she stirred the gravy at the stove, but if I could see her face, I'm sure it would mirror the horror she felt at Gran's suggestion.

I only half-listened to Gran through dinner as she planned out the next six months of Mom's life—something about cooking classes, water aerobics, and French lessons.

After helping clear the dishes, I tried calling Noel. She didn't pick up.

Dante's advice of asking her what the hell was up sounded pretty good the more I thought about it. We hadn't had a chance to fully discuss either of our missions. I felt like if I didn't get it off my chest soon it was going to drive me half mad. Shouldn't Noel be a bit more curious about Valerie skipping town? Not to mention happy about it?

I returned to the kitchen from the living room. "I need to head out."

"At this hour?" Gran asked incredulously.

Mom merely nodded. "I'll drive you."

"You know, if Aurora drove…"

"Mom!"

Gran turned back to her tea and pie. "Better bundle up, dear. It's like one big walk-in freezer out there."

My pleather jacket was better suited to spring and fall, but it's what I grabbed. At the last second, I ran upstairs for my red scarf.

"I'm surprised Gran didn't want to come with us," I said as soon as we'd pulled out of the garage.

Mom snorted. "And miss the chance to snoop around the house?" I glanced at my mom and we laughed in unison. It didn't last long. "How long will you be out?"

"I don't know."

"Are you on assignment?"

"No."

"Are you going somewhere dangerous?"

I thought a moment before answering with the truth. "Yes and no."

Mom nodded slightly. She kept her eyes on the road. "Do you have protection?"

"Got my knife, but I don't plan on using it."

"Where am I taking you?"

"Bootleggers Cove."

I had her drop me off at Elderberry Park. No way was I having her drive anywhere near the palace, not after what had happened to Agent Crist when she patrolled the area.

"You have your phone?" Mom asked after pulling into the park's small vacant lot. Her body became rigid as she stared through the windshield at the deserted playground. At night the statues looked rather creepy, like creatures crouched in the shadows.

She had to have seen my phone in my hand, but I held it up for reassurance. "Yep. Right here." I stuffed the phone inside my coat pocket, leaned across the car, and kissed her on the cheek. "I'm just going to talk to a friend."

She nodded tightly. "Be safe."

I unbuckled. "You, too. Gran's in full battle mode."

Mom's shoulders relaxed and she laughed. "Don't remind me."

"Will *you* be okay?" I asked.

"I'll manage."

At least Mom didn't look so tense when she drove off. I started down the hill toward the inlet and N Street, zigzagging my way across patches of dry pavement. Both sides of N Street were lined with condos. I stuffed my hands inside my coat pockets, sharing space on one side with my phone and my iPod on the other.

The humidity from my breath looked ready to freeze in the air. I pulled my scarf up to my nose, capturing the moisture in the fabric where it cooled instantly. We had to be in the negatives tonight.

I walked a couple blocks then turned right.

I hoped Noel had come out tonight, but what if she hadn't? I guess I'd call a cab after killing enough time for Gran to leave our house. She couldn't stay much longer. It was already late for her.

As I approached Marcus's townhouse, it began to strike me that coming over tonight wasn't the best idea. What friends did I really have here? I could hardly pretend to be with Fane, not after the way he'd cast me off.

I walked up to the hand-carved wooden door with the stained glass panels on either side and stared at the door knocker. I heard footsteps behind me and glanced over my shoulder. A young man walked up. Maybe one of the guys who'd been in the kitchen? I couldn't tell in the dark. "Don't be shy," he said, nodding at the front door.

I pulled on the door handle and walked in ahead of him onto the slabs of sand-colored stone in the entryway. The first time I'd been to the palace Henry told me Marcus imported the stones from Jerusalem. Now here I was walking on them in Anchorage, Alaska. Surreal.

I took my jacket and scarf off and hung them from one of the curly iron hooks along the wall of the entryway.

Latin music played on low from the direction of the living room. No disco tonight.

I pulled my tunic sweater down over my skinny jeans and headed for the kitchen. I tried play it cool when I walked in and found Gavin pouring a drink inside a martini shaker. I fought the urge to ask if he'd heard anything from Valerie.

"Aurora," he said evenly.

I stared at the martini shaker, waiting for him to shake it from side to side, but he didn't. "I don't suppose you've seen Noel around tonight?"

"Are you looking for Noel or Fane?"

My heart flopped. I put a hand on my chest. It didn't feel especially good. "Fane's here?"

"I suggest you check the October room," Gavin said.

"Why's that?" I asked coldly.

"Go see for yourself," he answered, matching my tone.

I hated the hard look on his face. Even more than that, I hated that I had to do the very thing he obviously wanted me to. I certainly didn't want to stick

around the kitchen with him. As soon as I turned my back, Gavin began shaking the mixer.

My feet carried me to the living room. The surroundings had begun to take on a dreamlike quality, all hazy around the edges.

Marcus stood leaning against the iron banister of the spiral staircase in one of his silk shirts, half-buttoned, chatting with a fellow to his left. He nodded at me in greeting, and I nodded in return. I passed him and stared at the first step of the staircase. Marcus broke off his conversation. He turned to me. "Are you sure you want to go up there?"

"Yes," I replied firmly.

He gave me a knowing smile. I'm not sure what he knew. It wasn't good, whatever it was, but there was no turning back.

With each step I took, I had that feeling in my gut that I really didn't want to see what I was about to, but I couldn't turn away. I reached the landing and passed the giant shower with its mosaic tile artwork.

The door to the October room loomed in the distance, the silver bat hanging heavy from the knob. I approached with even steps. I did not pause to listen when I reached it. My hand moved for the knob as though gliding on the strings of a puppeteer. It turned easily in my hand. I pushed the door open and stepped inside.

They sat on top of the bed in the flickering candlelight. Fane and Noel.

Noel's top had been dragged down her shoulder. A drop of blood beaded at the fresh puncture wound on her pale smooth skin. Not on the neck, but lower, right by her shoulder blade.

Fane's eyes were half-closed. It took him a moment to notice my intrusion. When he did, it looked like he was slowly beginning to wake from a dream. His expression cleared into one of recognition. Our eyes locked.

I couldn't speak. Neither, apparently, could Fane.

Then Noel saw me. "Aurora!" she cried. Horror filled her face. How comical. Noel Harper horrified that I'd walked in on their disgusting display of betrayal. I swear I hated her even more than Fane at that moment. "It's not what you think!"

I didn't give her time to explain.

I gave Fane one last look, one I hoped would haunt him for the rest of his everlasting life, then turned in place and walked out, shutting the door behind me.

The last thing I wanted was Fane or Noel coming after me. If I had to look at either of their faces or hear their voices, I'd fling myself off the balcony into Marcus's living room. And I just might have to if I wanted to make it downstairs in time.

I looked side to side frantically. All the doors had silver bats hanging from the knobs. I just needed a moment to avoid Fane and Noel and compose myself. I didn't want anyone to see my face until I'd had time to mask my emotions.

I hurried down the hall. Those stupid bats mocked me from each closed door. I quickly rounded a corner. At least I'd reached an area that couldn't be seen from the door of the October room. Even a bathroom would do at this point. I'd lock myself in and wait until I felt certain it was safe to come out. I didn't care if I had to wait all night.

A door at the end of the hall caught my attention. It was closed but there wasn't a bat hanging from the knob. I walked up to it and reached for the knob then stopped. My hand wasn't as adamant about going into this room. Then I heard a door open. This would have to do.

I yanked the door open and shut myself quickly inside.

I leaned against the door. My breath came out in ragged gasps. I fought to control my breath and listened. I thought I heard footsteps in the distance but then they died off.

Fane and Noel. I wanted to cry. I wanted to scream. I wanted to punch myself in the face and knock the image of the two of them together right out of my head. My lip curled back. Traitors, both of them!

How could Noel? She knew what it was like. She was worse than Valerie. At least Valerie did her backstabbing out in the open, not behind closed doors like Noel.

I clutched my stomach. Fane and Noel. The two of them together made me physically ill.

I stormed up to the window and glared at my reflection. The girl in the glass looked haunted. I wanted to smash through her face. I turned away from her and walked the few steps to the king-sized bed, dropping to my knees at the side as though in prayer. I shoved my face into the satin cover spilling over the edge. I pressed my mouth against the fabric to muffle my sobbing screams. I let it all out. I had nothing better to do, and I couldn't leave with the party in full swing. How could I show my face downstairs?

I stood up slowly and went back to the window. Too far above ground to make my escape. I guess I was just stuck waiting until morning. Hours of mind torture. What a Saturday night!

I felt an insane urge to call Dante. I was sure he'd happily charge through the front door and get me the hell out of here, but noooo, I had to go and leave my phone in my coat pocket.

I paced the room, muttering angry curses.

"Not ready to cross that line." I snarled under my breath. "Not like Noel!" I shouted at the door, punching my fist in the direction of the October room. I quickly covered my mouth and listened. When no one appeared at the door, I resumed pacing, muttering, and mocking everything he'd said to me the last time we were together.

"*What we had was good. Let's not ruin that.* Oh, you ruined it, buddy boy. You chewed up every good feeling I ever had for you and spit it back out!" I swung my arm in the air as though cracking an invisible whip. "*Good thing I have someone on the inside to look out for me.* Yeah, Noel! I see she's

looking out for alllll your needs."

Maybe there was a perfectly good explanation for this. Maybe Noel was just doing her job. Even if Melcher had instructed Noel to take Valerie's place with Fane, I couldn't let it go. There wasn't any room for rationalization inside my head when it came to him.

"All right, Aurora. Time to get a grip. Head held high. Let's get the hell out of here."

I stopped beside a statue, noticing for the first time the bust of a muscled chest ending at the groin. I looked around the room. A watercolor of two men seated naked beside one another hung at eye level beside the window.

On the opposite side of the room, oil paintings depicted full male nude frontals. The adjoining wall featured more whimsical and modern portraits, including an Asian silk screen with two men: one in black leather pants and another in red, thigh-high heeled boots.

"Oh wow," I said in a whisper. "I really need to get out of here."

I turned quickly away from a nude drawing of Peter Pan wearing spiked wrist cuffs and bumped into Marcus's dresser. My knee hit one of the artsy iron handles. I cursed.

"Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow." Pain shot up my leg. I'd hit the worst spot on my knee.

I gripped the dresser, breathing in and out, waiting for the wretched pain to pass. As it subsided, I straightened up, both palms firmly planted on the dresser's surface. I looked down and saw a box with swirls and squares intricately carved into the dark wood.

Jared claimed to have found Crist's cross inside a wood box in a bedroom.

The same feeling of dread I'd had as I approached the October room came over me. I lifted the lid and pushed it back gently. Inside I found leather and silver bracelets, pendants, a gold chain, large gothic rings, and even diamond cufflinks. And then there, nestled inside the box, I caught the glint of an orange oval gemstone. It practically flashed me in the eye.

My heart dropped to the floor. I felt sick all over again.

My fingers reached inside in slow motion. I lifted the ring in front of my face. The name "Mike" was carved into the silver on one side—an eagle, our school mascot, on the other.

My hand shook. My breath caught in my throat. At that moment the knob of the door began to turn. I fisted the ring, but I didn't have time to shut the lid on the jewelry box.

Marcus stepped inside. His expression darkened when he saw me. "Who do we have here?"

My heart raced to unnatural speeds inside my chest.

"This room is off limits."

I swallowed and tried to control my voice. "I'm sorry. I needed privacy. I was upset."

"And what or whom has caused such upset, my pet?" His voice amplified inside my ears as he approached. There was no hair on Marcus's chest, only rock solid muscles where his shirt gaped open.

"Fane," I whispered. I hoped he mistook the panic in my voice for heartache, but that wasn't what made my heart pump its way up my throat as I stood trapped inside Marcus's bedroom. Marcus, Mike's killer. Mike's real killer. And that possibly meant Crist's killer, too.

"Francesco and Noel," Marcus said knowingly. "Do not worry your pretty little head over Francesco. There are other bats in the sky."

"I'll keep that in mind," I said, meeting Marcus's eyes. "I'm sorry I intruded on your personal space." *Move feet, move*. I took my first step toward him, then the next, and began to pass. My heart called out to the open door. I could make it. I'd never felt so close to escape.

"Aurora, what is in your hand?"

That should have been my cue to run, but I froze in place. My fist tightened. I turned around, not wanting to keep my back to Marcus. "Nothing."

Marcus chuckled. "Why is a human's first reaction to lie?"

I shrugged. "Survival instinct?"

Marcus smiled. "A good instinct to have." He nodded at my fist. "Let's have a look."

I fought the urge to glance at the open door. No sudden movements or visible signs of panic seemed like the best advice in this situation. I lifted my fist slowly, trying to buy myself time. My fingers curled back. Mike's ring sat in my palm.

"Ah," Marcus said.

"Why did you kill him?" I asked calmer than I thought was possible.

"I didn't kill the boy, Aurora. You did."

I screwed up my face. "How do you figure that?"

"You brought him here."

"He followed me," I said defensively, despite my predicament. Just because Marcus had me cornered didn't mean I was going to let him pin a murder on me. Why couldn't vampires own up to their actions? "The moment I saw him, I escorted him out. I walked him to his car. How did you get to him?"

Marcus stretched, at ease as always. His neck popped when he leaned to the side. "The boy came back for his jacket."

"I told him I'd bring it to school."

"He came back," Marcus said firmly. "And because he knew you and had come here, I thought he knew of our existence. So I invited him on a personal guided tour. I found us a cozy little room and went in for a bite. Do you know what happened, Aurora?"

I felt my throat closing. I shook my head ever so slightly. I didn't want to hear. I closed my eyes for one brief moment.

“He started screaming.”

I opened my eyes and looked into Marcus’s cold gaze.

“I had no choice,” he said, devoid of emotion. “*You* left me no choice.”

I shook my head. Tonight wasn’t my night to feel guilty. It wasn’t my fault. I didn’t want Mike to like me. I didn’t want him at the palace. I didn’t want him to die. The culpability stabbed at my insides.

“And you leave me with no choice now,” Marcus said. He sighed and grabbed my arm. He was so quick he had his hand clamped over my mouth before I could scream. Mike’s ring fell from my fingers, clattering against the floor.

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We Die Young

Marcus hauled me with him to the door before slamming it shut. I struggled to break free of his hold. His grip tightened and I stomped on his foot. He squeezed my arms so tightly, tears leaked from my eyes. He had the same brutal strength as Jared.

I kept waiting for him to bite me so I could put an end to this nightmare evening, but he didn't. Naturally I'd get the gay killer vampire.

He pulled me down as he squatted in front of his dresser. My knees hit the floorboards. He pulled open the bottom dresser drawer. It was filled with leather bondage material.

My eyes widened as he pulled out a roll of duct tape, ripped a piece off with his teeth, and slipped it over my mouth, sealing my lips together.

When I squirmed, Marcus simply said, "It's not time yet."

He looked so determined, and it nearly took my breath away. Not that I had any breath with my mouth taped shut.

Marcus wrapped my wrists in duct tape, pushed me on the bed, and taped my ankles together. It reminded me of Thomas—human Thomas—the boy I'd taped to a chair in Fairbanks before Dante interrogated and killed him. Karma was one twisted bitch.

I tried to pull my wrists free while Marcus closed the door and rummaged through his closet. He returned with a stepladder and steel bar attached to chains and a snap hook.

Oh hell no.

Marcus grinned slightly as he unfolded the stepladder near the foot of the bed. He moved up the steps, reached up and attached the snap hook to a metal hook in the ceiling. My eyes expanded in my head. I would have preferred a disco ball, that's for sure.

Once the bar was hanging in place, he stepped down. While Marcus crouched over his drawer of playthings, I rolled across the bed. I meant to stop at the edge, lift up, and hop toward the door, but in my panic I rolled right off the edge and hit the floor with a wham. Maybe someone downstairs would hear. Ha, fat chance.

The leg I landed on throbbed. Marcus didn't bother turning from his drawer until he'd found what he wanted. He pushed the drawer closed and stood up. He turned, holding leather wrist cuffs and a pair of scissors.

It was useless, I knew, but I tried to scoot away from him.

Marcus crouched beside me and began snipping away the tape around my wrists. I tried to beat him with both hands bound together. I didn't care if he cut me. Maybe he'd see the blood and give it a lick.

Somehow, he managed to cut through the tape without cutting me. Once

my hands were free, I attempted to punch him, but he caught my right fist and shoved it inside the first handcuff. Marcus tightened the strap around my wrist. All the while I struggled. Clearly he'd had practice.

He grabbed my second wrist and shoved it in.

Marcus cut the tape around my ankles then lifted me to my feet and toward the ladder. I thrashed against him. I hated the way he didn't so much as grunt, as though dragging an unwilling victim across the room wasn't anything out of the ordinary.

He hauled me up the steps and yanked my right arm up so hard I was afraid he'd pull it out of the socket. A chain rattled overhead as he hooked my cuffed wrist to the suspension bar. I beat his chest with my left fist, but Marcus captured it easily and hooked it to the other side of the bar. Thus secured, he stepped down, taking the ladder with him.

I hung suspended by the wrists from Marcus's ceiling, a foot off the floor.

He refolded the stepladder gently and propped it against the wall.

Marcus stood in front of me, surveying his work with a smile of satisfaction. I tried to kick at him, glaring all the while. Marcus took a step back. "Now, feel free to struggle all you want. It won't do any good. I should know." Marcus let out a deep throaty laugh. "I wish I could offer you a playmate, but this will have to do until my guests depart." He looked me up and down. "I never did give you the full tour, Aurora. Once we're alone I'll show you my music room."

I stopped struggling and stared wide-eyed at him. Marcus shook his head grimly. "Such a pity."

He backed out of the room. I tried to scream his name before he walked out the door, but it was no use. The door clicked shut behind him.

I twisted from side to side. That wasn't any use, either, but I wasn't exactly in the mood to just hang around. The chains groaned over my head. I tried swinging forward, reaching my foot out to grab the edge of the bed. The only thing I managed to do was wiggle like a worm on a hook. My nostrils flared as I inhaled and exhaled rapidly.

I needed my knife. I kicked my feet, but the motion added extra strain on my outstretched arms. I tried bending my legs backwards. Even if I could touch the sheath around my waist with my toe, it wouldn't do any good. There's no way I could get under my sweater, get the knife out with my toes, and then magically lift it with my feet to my wrist and cut through the leather cuff. I wanted to laugh at the absurdity of it, but again, my mouth was taped shut!

Where the hell was Fane? How could he miss my red scarf hanging from the hook downstairs? The steel suspension bar above me creaked. Maybe I didn't want Fane to find me this way. Talk about humiliation.

I stopped fidgeting. I needed to save my energy for Marcus. Just one bite, that's all it took. I closed my eyes and concentrated on calm breathing through

my nose. Clearly I had the disadvantage. My arm muscles screamed with each passing second. Hopefully I wouldn't need my arms, but who knew how long Marcus would keep the party going downstairs? I might be hanging here all night.

Oh God, is this what the rack felt like back in the day?

I tried to think about other things to get my mind off my aching arms.

I would not die tonight. I refused. Hell would freeze over before I allowed my last moments on earth to involve walking in on Noel and Fane's suckfest.

That's right, Aurora. Concentrate on the anger, not the pain. After a while, I didn't have the strength to think.

By the time Marcus returned, I was happy to see him. Tears ran down my cheeks. After opening the door, he took one look at my face and frowned. "My poor, poor pet. I tried to get them all to leave sooner, but they wanted to stay."

He grabbed the stepladder from against the wall. As soon as he'd unfolded it, I set my feet down and started crying anew at the relief in my arms. I held still while Marcus unhooked me, even though I hated having his body pressed against mine. Through my nose I inhaled the smell of sweat and alcohol.

Marcus helped me to the edge of the bed. It didn't take much coaxing to get me to sit. While I did, Marcus removed the cuffs and gently massaged each wrist. He stopped, looked me in the eye, then ripped the tape off my mouth in one swift motion.

Without warning I began crying. Even worse, Marcus started rubbing my back. "There, there."

I needed this moment to compose myself. My arms felt limp and tingly. At least Marcus wasn't in any hurry to kill me.

Once I had my sobbing under control, I glanced at the open door. "Where's your partner?"

"This week it's an art show in New York."

"Does he know that you murder people when he's out of town?"

"I keep Richard in the dark for his own protection. Now I'm very sorry," Marcus said, "but it's time we adjourned to the music room."

I cried out when he took me by the arm. I didn't think he meant to be rough, not yet anyway, but it didn't hurt any less. Once the blinding pain passed, I asked, "Why did you kill Crist?"

"Who?" He paused with me in the doorway.

"Tall woman, dark brown shoulder-length hair. Late twenties or early thirties. Frown on her face."

Marcus chuckled softly. "I think I left you hanging too long."

Understatement of the year. The only reason I let him lead me down the hall is because I didn't want pressure or pulling of any kind on either of my arms.

"Up or down?" I asked at the landing.

Marcus studied my face. "You're taking this rather well, pet. You always were unusual."

"Yeah, well, why fight the inevitable?" I answered.

"Wise beyond her time. Such a pity," Marcus said again. "Ladies first."

I took the steps one at a time. The last thing I needed was to trip and break my neck. I watched my feet the whole way down. Even though my arms were now free they felt about as useful as spaghetti noodles. I made it down the last step and looked into the living room.

The lamps glowed eerily from low bulbs. I'd never seen that area deserted. Fane really had left me here.

I quickly blinked back tears.

"To the right," Marcus said.

I had never noticed anything to the right of the staircase. A narrow hall skirted the far wall. I followed Marcus down the corridor into a small room. As I suspected, there were no instruments in the music room but there were a couple giant speakers surrounding a massive stereo system.

The walls had gray sponge-like padding on them. Once I'd stepped inside, Marcus closed the door behind us. The familiar grip of terror seized my heart. This room reminded me way too much of my initiation room.

"What song would you like to die to, Aurora?"

I didn't answer.

"Staying Alive? Somehow I don't think that's appropriate tonight." Vampires really sucked at humor. "No last requests?" Marcus asked.

"Just one," I said looking him square in the eye. "Bite me."

Marcus grinned slowly. "I like you, Aurora. I always have. It's such a pity to have to kill you, but you've given me no choice. I tell you what," he said, leaning in closer. "Before I do, I'll grant your last request."

I leaned toward him like a lover leaning in for a kiss. I needed him to suck my blood. My life depended on it.

From the corner of my eyes I saw him go for my neck. Marcus's teeth pierced through my skin instantly. It felt like a clean break compared to the ones before. Should have known Marcus would be smooth to the end.

His lips formed a suction on my skin. He sucked. The sensation caused me to momentarily forget my predicament and shudder. Marcus kept his hands on me while he sucked.

The warmth of his lips left my neck. He took a step back and stared me in the eye.

A second later he spit my blood out on the ground, his upper lip curling back.

I stared from the splatter of blood on the floor to Marcus in shock. He looked equally spooked. "You taste like death."

"Marcus, I…" Oh God, he hadn't swallowed my blood. I took a step back.

"Why didn't you say anything?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I don't understand."

"You're new, aren't you? When did you die?" Marcus asked.

I shook my head again. What the hell did my blood taste like? Like Renard's? Like the guy in the vamp house? Not quite human. Vampire.

It's not as though I'd had an opportunity to ask before. Usually vampires swallowed after tasting my blood, which led to convulsion and death.

Did all AB blood taste this way, or did it have to be activated by a virus? And how the hell did Marcus know what vamp blood tasted like? My guess? He'd sampled vampires and humans alike!

He walked to my side and stroked my hair. "I should have known, my pet. I mistook your apprehension for something else. You must not worry about the boy. It was his fate to die. It is the fate of all humans, whether by our hands or the hands of time. The end result is the same."

I suppose I should have felt relieved, but I was still trapped inside a padded room with an admitted killer, and he still had his hand in my hair.

All I had to do was go along with his theory. Play the newbie vamp card and be on my way. I tried to think of what to say. *Yep, sucks to be human. Glad I'm not.*

Marcus's fingers slid over my hair again and again as though petting me. His hand suddenly stopped. I held my breath.

Marcus gathered a chunk of my hair in his fist and pulled. I screamed.

"What have you done to me?" His body began to shake, but he didn't let go of my hair and he didn't fall to the ground.

I tried to push away from him, but my arms felt like jelly. Instead, I dropped to the ground. My scalp screamed as a chunk of hair ripped out. I rolled quickly away the moment I hit the floor, and took a quick survey of the room.

Marcus grasped pieces of long black hair in his hand, staring in disbelief. His shoulders and head twitched. "I know what you are," he said, looking at me. His voice had changed. He spoke to me like he would a stranger—an extremely unwelcome one.

Marcus lifted the strands of my hair in front of his face then let go and watched them fall to the ground. He walked slowly to the stereo system. With his back turned toward me, I reached around my waist. I willed the feeling back into my fingertips as I groped for my knife.

Marcus lifted a remote in a shaky hand. An electric guitar screeched through the speakers followed by heavy drums and a deep, raspy snarling voice from Alice in Chains' "We Die Young." Our disco days were definitely over.

I used my elbows to lift to my knees and then feet, clutching the hilt of my knife in a death grip.

Marcus turned. The convulsing put him at a disadvantage, but made him look manic the way he shook all over. I didn't think he even noticed my knife;

his eyes were narrowed in on my face. It was beyond creepy the way he moved toward me at the same time Layne Staley sang that scary was on his way—like the whole thing had been choreographed. Is this how Mike died? No, I didn't want to think about that right now.

One side of my brain screamed at me to run for the door, but I couldn't leave Marcus alive. What little blood he'd swallowed might wear off at any moment. Marcus knew a lot of vampires. I couldn't allow him to alert any of them if I went running. Also, he'd killed Mike. And Crist. Maybe.

This whole double homicide had been playing Tetris inside my brain from the start. I kept trying to make all the pieces fit only to be bombarded by new information and uncertainties. It still didn't stack up. The one thing I could be certain of was Marcus's hand in killing Mike, and that's what I needed to focus on right now. My head pounded with the music.

I backed away from Marcus. He came at me slowly and we circled the center of the room. Bloody déjà vu.

The song ended abruptly. A second of silence ensued before the next Alice in Chains song started. Marcus and I locked eyes, saying nothing.

I squeezed the handle of my knife. I should attack. Every time I readied myself to spring forward, my fear reined me back in. It was like trying to psyche myself to bungee jump off a cliff. The moment I got too near the edge I panicked. If I didn't take the leap, Marcus would push me himself.

My heart lodged itself in my throat as I charged and rammed into Marcus with my shoulder. I hoped to knock him to the ground then plunge my knife into his heart as soon as I had him on his back, but even convulsing, Marcus was all rock solid muscle mass. He stumbled back a foot, but didn't fall.

His lips curled back. Without taking a step toward me, his hands shot forward and grabbed me by the neck. He began squeezing, crushing my windpipe.

The music drowned out my choking sounds.

Marcus squeezed harder. Another song ended and started.

I lifted my knife and jabbed at Marcus. It struck flesh.

He let go of my neck and roared in fury.

I gasped and sucked in deep breaths. I looked at Marcus with his hand pressed firmly on his thigh. His head bent to survey the damage.

Now, Aurora. It's time to jump.

I pulled my knife back, took two swift steps up to Marcus, grabbed his shoulder with my left hand, and plunged my knife into his heart with the right.

His head snapped up, the whites of his eyes expanding to unnatural proportions. He tried grasping for my hair but I shoved him backwards.

I walked to Marcus's side, watching to make sure I'd hit my mark. His lips opened and closed. The twitching stopped. His eyes stared at the ceiling, unblinking.

I waited. His body didn't move. His expression didn't change. "Angry Chair" filled the room. The volume had been cranked so high I felt the notes

vibrate inside my body. I grabbed the remote where Marcus had left it on a speaker and hit stop.

The silence provided a momentary respite. I glanced down at Marcus one last time then fled from the padded room of horror.

I hurried past the living room to the front entrance and found my jacket and scarf, the only ones hanging from a hook.

I yanked my phone out of my coat pocket and dialed Melcher's number. Hysteria overcame me the moment he answered. "I killed Marcus! He killed Mike and then he tried to kill me. So I killed him. He's dead! Marcus is dead!"

"Aurora," Melcher answered calmly. "Where are you?"

"I'm at Marcus's townhouse!" Where the hell did he think I was?

"Stay put and stay calm. I'll send someone over."

I paced the entryway, clutching my phone in case Melcher called back. I walked in and out of the kitchen, briefly considering a swig of whiskey. I picked up my knife where I'd set it down on an end table before calling Melcher. In the kitchen, I ran it under the faucet, shook the water off the blade, and then wiped it with a kitchen towel. I pulled my sweater up in back and slid the knife into its sheath.

Back in the entryway, I pulled my scarf and jacket off the hook and put them on, slipping my phone back inside my pocket. I stood on the edge of the living room.

I heard tires whine to a stop outside and waited, my breath suddenly erratic. I turned my body around to face the door. The knob clicked as the person outside grasped the handle.

I watched the door open and Jared walked in. He was dressed casually in jeans, a black tee, and a blue bandana tied around his forehead as though he'd been hanging out right before receiving Melcher's call.

I recognized that bandana. I'd focused on it in the seconds before my crash. The other driver's face had been hazy, an afterthought as I took in the vehicle coming at me head on. I'd seen his lips mouthing a curse. I can't imagine a head-on collision was pleasant, even for a vampire.

The bandana brought everything into focus.

Jared's eyes locked on mine without a trace of sympathy.

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25
Lost Souls

My breath caught in my throat as Jared started toward me. I couldn't move, no more than I could when his vehicle had come crashing into me that fateful afternoon when I lost three organs and my entire life to the agents.

The boy in the blue bandana.

I wasn't meant to die. Jared had done it. That psychopath had all but killed me.

This night kept getting better and better.

I didn't have time to react. Jared grabbed me by the arm as he'd done at the totem park, but the chance of him letting go this time was slim. He crushed my bones between his fingers, but I barely felt it, not after hanging from the rafters thanks to Marcus. Oh, how I wished they were both dead. I wished I could rewind time and pop Jared myself.

I couldn't tell if he'd worn the bandana to try and jog my memory or if it was simply part of his casual attire. In Sitka he asked if I recognized him as though he wanted me to or maybe he'd been feeling me out. Keeping quiet felt best at the moment.

Jared squeezed my arm.

My lips curled back. I crushed my teeth together, wanting so badly to bite him. "Do it," I said. "Break it."

Jared squeezed harder.

"Let her go." I heard Melcher's voice behind him.

Jared kept me in his grip. I felt his hesitation, knew my chances were fifty-fifty. He might obey, or he might break my arm to spite Melcher. He turned his head slightly to look at Melcher. His eyes returned to mine, and somehow I knew the final decision was mine once more.

I smiled at him, my front and bottom teeth crushed together. I imagined it looked rather ugly and that made me smile bigger.

Jared studied me a moment then slowly released his grip on my arm. Inwardly I winced, but at least he hadn't broken any bones. "Don't ever disobey me again," he said.

I looked at Melcher all spiffy in his suit. Did he have it on when I called, or did he change at warp speed like Batman when he responded to a distress call? What was he doing here anyway? I wouldn't think he'd want to sully his hands with a mess like this. That's what assassins and cleaners were for.

"Where's Marcus?" Melcher asked.

"I'll show you." I led Melcher and Jared to the music room.

Melcher walked straight up to Marcus's body and looked down. He stood silently for several minutes.

I looked at Jared who had leaned against the padded wall to survey the

room. He didn't speak.

"Marcus had Mike's ring in a jewelry box inside his bedroom," I said. I waited for Melcher to ask what I was doing in Marcus's bedroom. When he didn't, I continued. "He found me with it and confessed to killing Mike, but he wouldn't own up to Agent Crist."

"Andre Morrel killed Crist," Melcher said. "He had her cross."

I narrowed my eyes. If I had to come up with a theory, I'd say Jared killed Crist and used her death as an excuse to execute Andre and his entire family. If they'd left him in a prison to hang, as Melcher explained it, then Jared had plenty of motives to get revenge. He didn't strike me as a forgiving kind of vampire.

"But why was Crist's body found with Mike's?" I asked. It all led back to the dump, and once more the pieces scrambled and refused to fit inside my brain.

"It appears we had ourselves two separate killers," Melcher said. "For all we know Andre asked Marcus for help disposing of Crist's body."

Jared snorted. "Wouldn't that be Marcus's luck—a ready volunteer to take care of his own problem."

"And Andre wouldn't know where to dump a body being from out of town," Melcher said.

Now that made sense, except for one thing. "I still don't see what motivation Andre had for killing Crist…or how he even bumped into her." I glanced quickly at Jared.

Melcher stared at me a long time. "Aurora, you remember the *occupation* I told you the Morrel family used to engage in?"

"Yeah."

"Those instincts don't go away. Andre Morrel has always been a hunter. He doesn't get his blood from the blood bank."

"So he just happened to bump into Agent Crist, who just happened to be patrolling this neighborhood?"

Melcher didn't blink. "The murder is solved, Aurora. End of story."

Yes, sir! If you say so. Did Melcher really believe that load of crap, or was he covering for Jared? I doubt Crist ever set foot in this area that night. Jared stalked people for a living. He probably followed her off base, broke her neck, and then stumbled upon an interesting surprise when he tried to ditch her body at the landfill.

Melcher crouched beside Marcus and closed his eyes gently.

I watched as Melcher hovered beside Marcus's body. He began to speak in a low voice. I couldn't tell what he was saying at first then realized it was a prayer. "By the power of God, cast into hell Satan, and all the evil spirits, who prowl about the world seeking the ruin of souls."

I cranked my head back and looked at Jared. He barely glanced at me before stifling a yawn. I looked back at Melcher as he said, "Amen." He stood, looking solemn. "We can't pass this off as suicide."

Jared grunted and pushed away from the wall. “This is what happens when you let rookies go solo.”

“What’s the problem?” I demanded. “Marcus killed Mike. I killed Marcus. Isn’t that how it works?”

Jared leaned into my face. I forced myself to take even breaths. “The problem, you little fool, is that Marcus was a prominent figure within the vampire community. Rumors have already been circulating about what we do. He’s been stabbed in the heart. Why not put up a neon sign while you’re at it? Vampire Hunter was here.”

“So make him disappear,” I said. “Bury him at the dump.”

Jared snorted. He looked at Melcher. “Can you imagine the vamp hunt to track down Marcus’s whereabouts?”

Melcher nodded, his expression far away, focused somewhere beyond that room. “You should have called it in first, Aurora.”

I balled my fingers into fists. I felt like shaking one in Melcher’s face. “And how was I supposed to do that after Marcus chained me to his ceiling?”

Jared snorted and smiled at Marcus’s body. “Marcus chained you to the ceiling?” He looked overhead as he asked, searching for hooks, no doubt.

“Not here,” I said, grinding my teeth together. “Upstairs in his bedroom.”

Neither man asked if anything else had happened or if I was okay. Barbarians, both of them. “What is Jared doing here, anyway?” I asked Melcher. “I thought you were sending him out of state.”

“Jared isn’t going anywhere,” Melcher said. “I want him where I can keep a close eye on him.”

Jared snorted again. “Whatever you say, boss.”

Melcher looked at me, his expression grave. “Aurora, how many people saw you here tonight?”

My lower lip dropped. I didn’t answer immediately. I couldn’t. In the battle against Marcus, I’d blocked out the other consequences of this evening. “Everyone,” I said. “Everyone who was here earlier.”

Henry’s words echoed in my ears. *“You seem to have a knack for drawing unwelcome attention.”*

Gavin had seen me head toward the upstairs and never return. Then suddenly Marcus ends up dead. No, I’m sure he wouldn’t find that odd in the least. I hadn’t gotten a look in the living room as I passed. For all I knew Henry and Tom had seen me, too.

“Aurora,” Melcher said carefully. “I think it would be best if we sent you out of town for a while.”

“Out of Anchorage or Alaska?”

“Out of state.”

“Really?” My voice lifted. I hadn’t thought anything could brighten my mood tonight, but there was nothing I wanted more at that moment than to get the hell out of Alaska. Away from Jared and Melcher. Away from Noel and Fane.

"What about school?" I asked.

"I'll get you everything you need to obtain your G.E.D. through correspondence," Melcher said. "I know it's not what you wanted, but having you stick around at this point isn't a good idea."

"It's fine," I said. "Can you reassign me to another state permanently?" Indiana? I could still attend Notre Dame. Perhaps there was such a thing as second chances. Melcher certainly owed me. If Jared had gotten to me, it was only because Melcher gave him the resources to do so. I wasn't about to ask Melcher what he knew about Jared's recruiting practices. I trusted Melcher about as much as I trusted his new sidekick.

"No, we need you up here."

I felt my heart drop even though I knew the verdict before Melcher delivered it. "We'll send you away to finish your education, followed by boot camp as planned. You'll be back by the end of summer and can attend UAA if you still choose to."

"Where are you sending me?"

"Don't worry about that," Melcher said.

"I mean, should I pack flip flops? A bikini?"

Melcher walked out of the room instead of answering. As I passed Jared he leaned into me and said, "Nice try, Raven."

I kept my expression neutral.

It didn't matter where Melcher sent me. I was going to give boot camp everything I had, and when I got back, Jared better watch himself.

He had run me down and taken my life so that I would be forced into killing vampires. Well, that's exactly what I planned to do. Kill Jared. It might be too late for me, but that didn't mean I couldn't save countless other targets on Jared's list of potential AB negative recruits.

Melcher stepped into the living room, lifting his phone to his ear. "Send in the cleaners," he said into the speaker. He lowered the phone, glancing at me. "I'll have one of my men drive you home."

"Don't bother," I said. "I'll have my mom pick me up on L Street. She's expecting my call. She isn't aware of this address," I added.

Melcher nodded. "Very well." With that he turned to Jared and started talking as though I were no longer there.

Fine by me.

As I approached the entry, the front door opened and two men in biohazard suits walked in wearing masks. I tried not to stare. I'd never actually stuck around long enough to see the cleaners. Not that I could distinguish anything beyond their facemasks.

They didn't spare me a glance as we passed over the stones of Jerusalem. I looked over my shoulder one last time. No more disco. No more parties. No more champagne and blood.

Melcher had forgotten to say his customary lines. Justice had been served.

Despite this being the shittiest of shit nights in the whole history of my life, I knew I'd done the right thing, and I'd continue to fight the battle even if I had to start a war from within.

I stepped outside and breathed in the night air.

As soon as I'd put several blocks between myself and the townhouse, I sent Valerie a text in case she was checking.

We have unfinished business to take care of.

I slipped my phone back into my pocket and pulled out my iPod, nestling each ear bud deep inside my eardrums.

There wasn't a cloud overhead. The aurora borealis, for which I was named, weaved like a river in the sky. Usually it was too cloudy to see them, but tonight shades of pink, purple and green cast light across the expanse overhead.

I selected "Running Up That Hill" by Placebo from my easy listening playlist and began the long walk home.

The occasional car zoomed by, otherwise the streets were deserted. The digital clock on my phone showed the hour approaching one in the morning.

I didn't want a ride home. I wanted to feel the hard ground beneath my feet, the frigid air going down my throat. I sucked it in. It didn't chill me one bit.

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SUMMARY

Noel Harper got a second chance at life when the government recruited her as an undercover vampire informant. Since the day they brought her back from the good-as-dead, she has wanted to prove herself worthy.

When a member of her investigative unit is murdered, Noel is paired up with a vampire hunter named Dante to spy on a suspect in Fairbanks. The problem? They're not the only ones on stakeout. Taking down murderous vampires is one thing. Dealing with the past is another. But this time, Noel isn't letting fear win. She's calling in help from the other side and discovers a shocking secret along the way.

Book 2.5 of 6

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1
Taken

A bare-chested young waiter in a black bow tie handed me a Bloody Mary as I entered the palace on a Saturday night.

No vampire threw a party like Marcus. Case in point: the two topless waiters circulating the room.

Marcus's vampire and human guests gathered in the living room, mingling and mixing like a smooth cocktail. Many of the faces were familiar—regulars like me scoping out the scene until they found someone to sneak off with to the rooms above. It was all about making a connection with a consensual blood donor.

Everyone who entered the palace was a willing participant. And if a vamp got out of hand, I—Noel Harper, undercover agent for the United States Government's secret vampire division—was there to catch him in the act. As an informant, I knew just about everything about every vampire within the city limits, and the dazzling parties were just a perk. I had the best job ever.

Finding a seat amid all the furniture and art proved challenging, but I spotted a vacant brocade armchair not far from the windows and Marcus's ginormous telescope. Could probably see every crater on the moon with that thing.

Once settled, I held the drink in front of my face and stared at the ice cubes as they circled the glass with each twist of my wrist. My lace gloves absorbed the condensation that beaded like rain against a windowpane before streaking down the clear surface.

Without removing my eyes from the glass, I saw a young man in a striped polo and skinny chinos glance in my direction.

I wasn't here to make friends, so I continued swirling the drink.

Of all the conversations in play, the blonde beside me was the most annoying, which made it more difficult to tune out. She squatted to take a look through Marcus's telescope. It was one of those crystal clear, cold-as-sin nights where the stars nudge their way into the inky sky like a hundred thousand fireflies suspended in space.

Not that fireflies existed in Alaska, let alone space.

"Isn't the universe amazing?" Miss Stargazer asked. "Who knows how long it goes on? Maybe there's no end. Maybe it's forever."

Yeah, that was deep. The vamp standing attentively by her side was more interested in the freckles on her neck than the universe or its stars. He gazed longingly at her exposed skin when the girl leaned down to take another glimpse through the eyepiece.

I turned away from the blonde, resting my back against the armchair, and twirled my drink while observing my admirer from beneath my bangs. He

watched me several more seconds before heading over.

"You gonna drink that or keep swirling it all night?" he asked.

I looked up coolly. Noel Harper never gushed over vampires.

"I've been watching you." He smirked, like he had this one in the bag. The feeling was mutual. I could have him upstairs in a heartbeat.

I didn't recognize him, which meant he was an out-of-towner or recently relocated. Meaning I better do my homework and catalogue the vamp as a friendly, hostile, or a person of interest. Always on the clock.

The vamp moistened his lips. "Looks like you could use some company."

My hand stilled on the glass. I set it on the crackled glass tabletop adjacent to my chair and brushed my bangs aside. I was preparing to introduce myself when a voice from behind spoke abruptly. "She's taken."

My heart knocked against my ribcage. After all the things I'd seen and heard as an informant, no boy—human or vampire—had ever acted possessive of me. It set my nerves buzzing.

I didn't see the speaker until Abercrombie & Fitch turned sideways to look at him.

It was Gavin. He stood, shoulders relaxed, the barest hint of a smile on his face—in all appearances friendly. But there'd been no mistaking the threat in his tone.

The other vamps shoulders sagged. "My bad. Sorry, man, didn't know."

Gavin let out a puff of annoyance and looked upwards. The vamp sidestepped his way between the couch and coffee table.

"My bad," Gavin repeated, not bothering to lower his voice. "He's obviously new. Probably still growing in his baby fangs."

I stifled a laugh.

Gavin smiled suddenly. I loved his shaggy brown bangs. There was something so boyishly deviant about them.

"You haven't touched your drink," Gavin noted.

I gave it a brief glance. "Never liked these things."

"You want something else?"

I looked Gavin in the eyes. "No."

"Good."

If Gavin wanted me to go upstairs he would have to ask. It didn't take long.

"Would you like to join me?" He raised a hand to the floor above.

"Why not?" I got up and followed Gavin across the room.

He stopped at the base of the spiral staircase and grinned. "Ladies first."

I wound my way up the stairs, glad Gavin, not Henry, had asked me to join him. Henry was polite and hot as hell, but the sweet nothings he whispered before biting a girl were annoying. Gavin always got right down to business. Bite. Suck. No romanticizing. My kind of vampire.

I passed an open doorway. Gavin's footsteps stopped behind me. "This one's available."

I had my sights set on the October room down the hall. I thought of it as my room and that door was open. “What about the October room?”

“Fine by me,” Gavin said.

I walked in ahead of Gavin and plucked the silver bat hanging on the inside doorknob. I handed it to Gavin and he slipped it around the outside knob. It meant one thing. DO NOT DISTURB. A well-known rule at the palace.

Pillar candles blazed from the top of a dresser, casting shadows that jumped from one wall to the next. The October room was named such for the varying shades of orange on the ceiling, walls, and décor. I settled onto the bed, stretching my hands behind me as Gavin watched. I felt sleepy in an out-of-body dreamy sort of way.

Gavin walked over and took a seat beside me.

I leaned my head to one side, giving him better access to my neck. Gavin breathed steadily inside the quiet of the October room. When he didn’t lean in like usual, an erratic heartbeat ricocheted through my chest cavity.

Gavin was harmless as far as I could tell, but even the friendly vamps could slip up.

A seemingly behaved vampire named Eric had killed a girl in the heat of the moment four months ago. I reported it to Agent Melcher, and he got one of his hunters on it. Now Eric was dead. For good.

Maybe it was my imagination, but Gavin seemed nervous. Nervous was never good.

I didn’t have poisoned blood like AB negative vampire hunters Aurora and Dante, but mace worked just as well in a pinch. All I had to do was reach under my skirt and retrieve the small spray bottle from the pouch sewn inside. It made the perfect hiding place and was great as a distraction tactic when running my hand down my thigh to retrieve the bottle.

I slowly slid my hand down my skirt but was stopped when Gavin put his hand on my wrist. His fingers were surprisingly warm against my skin. He lifted my arm gently, making it feel feather-light. More gently still, he turned my arm around, wrist facing up.

Ever so slowly he peeled the glove off my hand. The lace brushed against my fingers, inciting goose bumps across my exposed wrist. I followed Gavin’s gaze to the blue veins running beneath the surface of my pale skin.

A two-inch scar bisected the veins beneath my palm. I tried to pull my hand away, but before I could, Gavin’s head bent forward. His tongue left a wet trail along the inside of my arm. He stopped at my wrist and swirled his tongue below the edges of my palm. I sucked in a breath and leaned back.

Gavin held on tighter, kissing my wrist before sucking on the skin. He ran his tongue down my arm to my elbow crease. His wicked tongue was making me wet between my legs without even venturing south. Would he dare?

Focus Noel! Foreplay with a vampire... not a good idea.

I cleared my throat. “I believe you’re supposed to bite the skin before you suck it.”

Gavin stopped abruptly and pulled away from my wrist. For a moment his face was expressionless in the shadows of the room. “Very well, Noel, I can take a hint.”

I opened my mouth to speak but no words came out. I hadn’t meant to offend him. I’d liked what he was doing even if it wasn’t exactly kosher. Some informants were assigned specific vampires to date and keep tabs on, but I’d never received such orders. My task involved getting to know the crowd at the palace and make myself available to anyone who drank blood. That’s it. No dating. No screwing. And certainly no foreplay unless absolutely necessary.

Gavin swept my hair over my shoulder and leaned in.

“What’s it like?” I asked suddenly. “Living forever?” I turned on the bed, swiped my lace fingerless glove, and slipped it back over my wrist.

Gavin’s expression softened. He scooted further up the bed. His eyes locked on mine. How could such a beautiful being who breathed in and out as normally as me live forever, I wondered.

I was the one not breathing. I didn’t realize I’d been holding my breath until Gavin began talking.

“It’s like time is standing still,” Gavin said. “But at the same time everything is always changing. Decades come and go. I’ve seen incredible technological advances and social changes, but at the same pace as any mortal, so I don’t notice the changes until certain moments when it hits me how much has changed.”

“How long have you been around?”

Gavin lifted his chin proudly. “Two hundred and eight years.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Old man.”

“I’m immortal, not old.”

There was maybe fifteen inches between our faces. I leaned forward. “But I mean, how old do you feel?”

“Eighteen.”

I puffed in disbelief.

Gavin smiled. The most I ever saw inside his mouth was his two front teeth and their immediate companions. Not far from those he had a set of sharpened teeth, which I’d personally experienced buried inside my neck.

“When you look eighteen, people treat you like you’re eighteen,” Gavin explained.

“Why don’t you have an accent?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Aren’t you originally from Europe?” He was Caucasian and over 200 years old. Had to be European, right?

Gavin scowled. “I’m not European. I was born in America.”

I looked up at the rust-colored ceiling. “Two hundred and eight years

ago?"

Gavin sat up straighter. "You better believe it. Virginia native, just like George Washington." He eyed me dubiously. "You do know who George Washington was, don't you?"

I leaned forward and smacked him on the shoulder. "Of course I do!"

"Ouch." Gavin rubbed his shoulder. "You're strong for such a shorty."

"Alaska born and bred," I said, lifting my nose. "Like a bear cub."

"Black bear," Gavin said smiling. "Small, but fierce."

"That's right." I stretched and lay back on the bed, staring at the ceiling. Gavin followed my lead, breathing steadily beside me.

"Why the blood lust?" I asked even though I knew the answer from training. In addition to their nocturnal habits, vampires were afflicted with a rare genetic disorder that broke down the production of hemoglobin, the red pigment found in blood. The desire to drink blood wasn't driven by lust so much as instinct. Vampires were simultaneously diseased and yet untouchable in terms of sickness and age.

The irony of being a vampire.

"I feel better after drinking blood," Gavin admitted.

"Why not just drink from a bag?"

Gavin turned on his side, propping his head on his hand. "I don't have access to that kind of supply for starters. Secondly, it's not fresh."

I turned my head. "You can taste a difference?"

"Of course."

"Fresh squeezed," I said and snorted.

Gavin grinned. "And then there's the intimate experience of drawing blood directly from the source."

I grinned mischievously at him. "You like that, do you?"

"You tell me."

I turned toward the ceiling, closing my eyes as Gavin leaned in. He inhaled through his nose before sinking his teeth inside my neck. Pleasure and pain shot through me. I cried out softly when his teeth broke through my skin.

His lips pulled gently at my neck as he coaxed blood from my vein to his tongue.

A feeling of warmth and connection rushed through me. It wasn't like this usually. Usually it was like bracing myself for a shot and waiting for the needle to come back out. But Gavin, oh Gavin, why did I suddenly feel lightheaded in the most welcome way?

"How do I taste?" I asked breathlessly.

He lay back beside me. I glanced at his lips feeling a rush of attraction.

"You taste... different."

I looked quickly from his mouth to his eyes. "Different how?"

"I don't know. Your blood has a unique flavor."

I relaxed my head back into the blanket and smiled. "I bet you say that to all the girls."

"No, there's something odd about your taste."

An involuntary shiver traveled up my spine. What if information ever leaked that informants had a particular flavor or vampires figured it out for themselves? It would make it pretty hard to fly under the radar if they had only to taste the truth.

"And you just noticed this now?" I asked.

"I noticed the first time I bit you. I asked Henry about it, and he noticed the same thing. We've never tasted another human with blood like yours."

One of the candle flames in the corner started spazzing out as it reached the end of the wick. Goosebumps rose over my arms. At least they didn't have another informant to compare me with.

"What blood type are you?" Gavin asked.

"AB positive," I answered truthfully.

Gavin reached a hand in the air as though attempting to touch the ceiling. "Me, too."

I tried to listen to music on the drive home, but the lyrics kept competing with my thoughts so I switched the tunes off.

I should have been pondering blood type and taste, but I kept snapping back to the moment Gavin ran his tongue over my arm. Why had he done that? Seemed like he wanted something more from me.

Sex with a vampire.

I'd always figured it was only a matter of time before Melcher ordered it. What if a vampire chose me? Sleeping with Gavin was practically a job requirement if he initiated it. And if I happened to encourage it, it was solely in the name of duty.

I snorted aloud. "Liar."

I passed my apartment building, pulling into a curbside spot a block down the street. Each unit had only one spot under the carport and my roommate Michelle called it since her name was on the lease.

I checked our mailbox as I came through the front entrance. Among the catalogs and magazines was a red, padded envelope addressed to me. There was no return address. I squeezed the stack of mail under my arm and unlocked the door to the lower entrance, quickly passing the laundry room. Our apartment was a third story, corner unit on the far side of the building. Wind had blown snow into the open hallway. The particles were as dry as dust and had collected into piles along the wall like sand from an hourglass.

The hollow echo of my footsteps followed me to the front door. I pulled out my skull and crossbones keychain and unlocked the door. Light from the TV flashed across the living room's far wall. I set the magazines on the kitchen counter.

My second roommate, Trudy, stood in the living room flicking her wrists

at her boyfriend, Alex, who missed the gesture completely as he played a war game on Xbox.

"All you ever do is stare at that damn screen. We never talk or do anything interesting anymore," Trudy said.

Alex tilted sideways with his controller, eyes on the TV as he responded. "Then why do you want to go to the movies? I'll be staring at a screen, and we won't be talking. I can do that here without having to pay twenty bucks."

I muttered a quick "hi" before ducking inside my bedroom and closing the door. Trudy and Alex reminded me of an old married couple. I'd forgotten how boring guys who didn't bite could be.

Once I was seated cross-legged on the floor, I tore into the envelope.

Out spilled candy, a pendant, and another red envelope. I tore it open and pulled out an invitation.

LOVE BITES
COCKTAIL PARTY
FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 15TH
DUSK
AT THE PALACE
HOSTED BY MARCUS
WEAR RED OR BLACK

I took a closer look at the pendant that had fallen out: a silver heart with the words "Bite Me" engraved in the middle. I unclasped the chain and put it around my neck.

Trudy's voice carried through the walls. "You think I want to spend my night off watching you play video games?"

I fished my iPod out of my backpack. Once my ear buds were inserted, I turned up the volume and began undressing for bed. Pajama pants and tank tops were my personal sleep favorites. I stripped off my lace gloves. Before replacing them with soft arm warmers, I held my palm up to my face, feeling a slight tremor run down my torso. I couldn't remember the last time a guy had made my heart rate quicken. Even Mr. Griffin, my Psych teacher at Denali High, had been mere eye candy in comparison.

I selected "Love Song for a Vampire" by Annie Lennox from my playlist. The music played through my ear buds as I opened my bedroom door and moved down the hall to the bathroom.

Usually I could hear Trudy through the music from this location, but no angry girl voice screamed through the tune. I popped my head around the corner. The living room and kitchen were submerged in darkness. Alex wasn't in front of the TV.

That was weird. Maybe Trudy had finally browbeat him into taking her on an actual date, or maybe he'd gone home to gun down animated characters on his own TV. I saw a slight movement in front of the kitchen window. I hit

the pause button on my iPod and pulled my ear buds out.

Trudy and Alex had their backs to me, staring at something outside.

"What's going on?" I asked, walking toward the kitchen.

"Some guy's been out there sitting in his car all night," Trudy said without turning around.

"All night?" I asked.

"I first saw him when I grabbed us beers," Trudy said, turning to Alex. "How long ago was that?"

Alex stood straight, arms flexed. "At least three hours ago."

"Maybe he's picking someone up," I said.

Trudy leaned away from the windowpane. "Or he could be a psycho waiting for someone to come home so he can kill her."

I shuddered, despite the unlikelihood of Trudy's musings. Unfortunately, sick things happened. I'd seen actual corpses in my line of work. Well, if it wasn't a vampire, it wasn't my problem. That didn't mean I wasn't curious to take a look at our neighbor's potential stalker.

"Let me see."

Trudy moved aside enough to free up a spot at the window. Alex was rooted in place, unable to keep his eyes off the mystery vehicle. "I'm going down there," he said before I had a chance to locate the car.

"No, Alex. Don't!" Trudy's face stretched in panic.

"I'm just going to ask what he's doing," Alex said, backing away from the window and moving toward the door.

Trudy abandoned her post to chase after him. "Alex, I'm begging you. Do not go out there. Let's call the police... or ignore him. He's not our problem."

Now that I had the window to myself, I looked down at the cars below the low ceiling of the carport. None of them were idling. Then I saw it, exhaust pouring steadily from a red and silver Bronco alongside the neighboring warehouse. My heart shot straight into my throat. I wavered as though the ground below me were rolling under a quake.

I was too high up to see the driver, but I knew who he was. Trudy hadn't been far off with the psycho part.

The last person I ever wanted to see again was only a stone's throw away. My father had found me.

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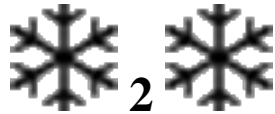

2
Three Out Of Five

After Alex called the police, we stood watching from Trudy's bedroom window, which offered a closer view of the Bronco. I still couldn't see inside the vehicle from where I stood. My nails cut into my hands as I balled them into fists.

Maybe it's not him, I tried reasoning. Clive didn't own the only red and silver Bronco in Anchorage. And what was I doing, letting a car freak me out? So what if it was him? I wasn't the pathetic girl I used to be. I was Noel Harper, government agent, trained to kill.

Clive should be afraid of me.

Unfortunately, Clive wasn't afraid of anything. He thrived on fear. I'd rather be stuck inside a cell with a rabid vampire than creepy Clive.

Two beams of light appeared from the one-lane dirt road between our building and the warehouse. Blue and red lights bounced between the two walls.

"Here come the police," Alex said, sounding the most animated I'd ever heard him.

I watched long enough to see the police car pull up behind the Bronco and an officer step out. I backed away from the window.

"What's happening?" I asked.

Alex leaned into the window. "An officer's approaching the car."

"Now what?"

Alex didn't respond right away. "The guy's rolling down his window. I can't see his face, but he's talking to the policeman."

"Get down!" Trudy yelled suddenly. She grabbed Alex's arm and pulled him down with her.

"What?" Alex asked, staring into her wide eyes.

"I saw him look up here."

"There's no way he could see us with the lights off," Alex said.

"Well, I saw him look."

"Doesn't mean he saw us."

Trudy pulled at the ends of her hair. "Now he'll know we're the ones who called the police."

"It's okay, babe. Anyone would come look from their window if they saw police lights flashing below. Probably everyone on this side of the building are at their windows watching right now."

"Unless they're asleep or out enjoying their Saturday night," Trudy grumbled.

We waited silently for several minutes, me standing in the doorframe, Trudy and Alex sitting on the floor. Finally, Alex began to rise.

"What are you doing?" Trudy asked.

Alex grinned. "Taking a look outside."

He stuck his face inches from the glass. "He's still there," Alex said in disbelief.

I gripped my arm.

"He is?" Trudy asked. "What about the policeman?"

"Gone."

Alex remained in place staring down while Trudy and I kept out of view. Alex uncrossed his arms. "That's it. I'm finding out what's going on."

Trudy hurried to her feet and followed Alex out of the room. I moved quickly to the side to let them through before following slowly into the living room.

"Alex, do not go down there!"

"I'm not. I'm calling the dispatch woman back and asking what happened."

"Like they're going to tell you," Trudy said.

"I have the right to know if some stalker is hanging around my girlfriend's apartment." Alex yanked his phone out of his pocket and hit redial. "Hi, I called like twenty minutes ago about a man who's been parked in front of my girlfriend's apartment building for several hours and you sent a policeman here, but he's come and gone and the guy is still sitting out there." Alex was silent a moment. "Okay. Thanks." He slipped his phone back inside his pocket.

"Well?" Trudy asked.

"She said the officer talked to him and he had a good reason for being there and that's all she could tell me." Alex shrugged and headed for the TV.

Trudy placed a hand on her hip. "What reason could anyone have for waiting hours inside their car, in the cold, watching a building all creepy-like?"

"I don't know," Alex said, picking up the controller. "Go ask him."

"You ass!" Trudy yelled. "You'd send me down there to confront some psycho killer?"

"Yeah, sure that's exactly what I'd do," Alex said.

I retreated into my room. It was a small comfort that I slept on the opposite side of the carport. The street was below my bedroom window, which meant no one could park beneath.

I thought about calling Agent Melcher. He'd helped me before. But I shouldn't need his help anymore. I should be able to handle my own shit. So I booted up my laptop and began looking at ads for roommates. There were some rooms for rent in the area. Nothing as close to school as my current location, but on the off chance Clive had found me, I wasn't sticking around. Let him sit out in his car freezing for hours watching the wrong building. At least he wasn't at home terrorizing my little brother.

Christopher.

I chocked back a sob.

Melcher said I could never see my mom or brother again. If I wanted Clive out of my life for good it was all or nothing. Melcher had helped me, but he hadn't shown sympathy. I didn't deserve any. If I'd succeeded in killing myself, I wouldn't have seen my brother again anyway. At least now I had the opportunity to take down bad guys.

And I loved bringing them down.

The fewer creeps in the world the better. Job satisfaction to the max. And it felt good knowing that in the end Clive hadn't gotten the better of me.

Noel Harper lived on. The vamps weren't the only ones who'd cheated death.

I woke up to Cyndi Lauper's "Into the Nightlife" Monday morning, not bothering to take my ear buds off as I slid my feet under the covers to the floor a foot below my mattress. My arm brushed over the hilt of my dagger—the perfect bed companion to any vampire informant being stalked by her psychotic father.

The Bronco hadn't returned Sunday morning and Clive would be at work now. He might know where I lived, but I knew all that and more about him, including his work schedule and that he'd never miss a day no matter how much he enjoyed tormenting me.

I yawned and stretched. Monday mornings sucked like nobody's business.

I began riffling through a pile of clothes near the head of my mattress. They weren't folded, but they were clean.

What to wear? Black fishnets or striped stockings? Decisions, decisions. I thought of Gavin and had a sudden urge to sneak into my roommate Trudy's room and snatch a pair of tan tights. Shit, I'd even settle for plain black. I don't know how Agent Crist got it into her head that Gothic wench equaled vamp bait.

So be it.

I tossed the striped pair back into the pile, shimmied on a pair of black panties, followed by the nets. The old me would have died of mortification if she showed up wearing these things to school. The new me didn't give a crap and knew how to convey that in one look. If the evil eye didn't work a few hostile words usually did the trick. "You looking at something?" Most people weren't expecting the mouth off. For the truly heinous teenagers who rose up to the challenge, I saved the scorcher. "Bitch, I will cut you when you least expect it." If the first two attempts didn't have the desired effect, the last one always did. A threat was as powerful as any weapon.

I dragged my ass off the mattress and made for the beat-up dresser. I'd spotted it on the curb in front of the building last week with a handwritten

“Free” note taped on top. The middle drawer was missing, but that still gave me two more than what I previously had. Not like my meager government stipend went very far.

I reached through the gap in the center of the dresser and pulled a black tulle skirt out of the bottom.

Once I’d secured my black corset, I stepped out of my bedroom. The only good thing about waking up at the butt-crack of dawn was having the bathroom to myself, even if it meant being extra quiet while Trudy and Michelle slept in the other room. The other bedroom was bigger so they shared it. Plus, they were friends. Probably wanted to give the Goth chick separate quarters.

I brushed through my black hair, careful not to rip out my ear buds. I applied red lipstick and heavy black mascara, the two essentials.

After finishing two bowls of Fruit Loops, a Pop-Tart, and cup of instant coffee, I grabbed my coffin-shaped backpack and drove to school.

At lunch I joined Gavin and Henry in the cafeteria, paper sack in hand. They’d been nice inviting me to eat with them after I transferred. But today three girls were seated at the table before I had a chance to sit down. The paper bag crinkled in my fist when I squeezed it. I lifted my chin and walked over despite the lack of empty seats.

Gavin smiled when he caught sight of me, fueling my resolve. He stood up before I reached the table. “Hello, Noel. Have my seat.”

“Thanks.” I sat down casually. Good thing my corset was tight. It held in my thundering heart as Gavin scooted in beside me.

The girl to my left wore a black skirt similar to mine. I suddenly hated that I looked like her.

“Ladies,” Henry said. “This is Noel Harper.”

“Hey,” the girls said. They certainly had the dark, angry, “I don’t give a shit” look down.

Henry shot me a devilish smile. “You ever want the lowdown on where to spend an unforgettable Friday night, get on this girl’s good side. Noel’s in the know.”

The girls exchanged glances.

“Nice to meet you,” the tallest of the Goths said. “I don’t recognize you.”

“Just transferred,” I said.

“Cool.” The girl’s hair was parted down the middle with a black braid on each side. Someone ought to call The Addams Family and let them know Wednesday had migrated to Alaska.

At the end of lunch, Henry herded the group of girls out of the cafeteria. I lingered behind with Gavin.

“What’s with the black widows?” I asked.

Gavin’s brows jumped in amusement. “Marcus requested we make new friends, says his parties are becoming a little too dead for his liking. Anyway, we’re doing what we can to help improve the demographics. What happened

to your friends, by the way? Haven't seen them around in a while."

"Whitney and Hope?" I shrugged. "They've been hanging out on the east side."

"Uh oh," Gavin said. "Don't tell me Marcus has competition." He winked playfully.

"Hardly," I said, rolling my eyes. "They're more comfortable with that crowd, I guess." I didn't want to identify the type I meant, but I'm sure Gavin already knew. Junkies trying to exchange blood for a hit.

Gavin studied me carefully. "And you're not?"

I straightened my shoulders. "Don't let the appearance fool you."

"That's a relief." The bell rang. Gavin placed a hand on my shoulder. "See you at lunch tomorrow."

"Yeah," I said.

As I turned to head to film class, my phone beeped. I stopped in front of some lockers and dug it out of my pack. Melcher had sent a text.

Report to base after school.

I dropped my phone back inside my vinyl coffin.

"Hey, freak. Did you get lost on your way to the corner of Fourth and F?"

I had no doubt Miss Bitchy Voice was addressing me. Cool. Hadn't heard that one before. Should have gone with the striped stockings. I looked up. A cheerleader with a high swinging ponytail stood five feet away, assessing me. At least she only had one friend by her side rather than a whole posse of pom-pom pussy.

I shook my bangs out of my eyes. "Actually I'm meeting your boyfriend after school. He says you're more frigid than an Eskimo's tit."

The bitch's companion leaned forward, her cheeks filling with air, and laughed. I interrupted Prissy Pom-Pom before she could respond. "Here's some free advice. Put more pep into his pecker and maybe he'll be faithful for more than a week." I started to pivot, stopped, and turned suddenly, stepping toward the girls.

They leaned back, eyes expanding.

"Call me a freak again, and I'll cut you."

I turned and walked away from them, smiling to myself once they were behind my back.

Fucking cheerleader. Her skirt was at least six inches shorter than mine and she didn't have on any tights. Talk about calling the kettle black. She looked like she'd wandered off the set of a boarding school porno.

I walked into film class, happy to find another familiar face even if it was bent over an open textbook.

I took a seat beside my colleague and friend Aurora Sky and said, "Hey."

She looked up. "Hi."

This was only Aurora's second week at West High, but unlike me she came by choice... if you called avoiding the sight of your old flame rekindling

the fire with his old flame a choice.

It was for the best no matter how decent of an undead guy Fane Donado was. A vampire hunter couldn't go around dating potential targets.

An informant was another matter altogether. We didn't have poisoned blood. One accidental taste of Aurora's blood, and a vamp would go into an epileptic fit. There were certain vampires Melcher didn't want harmed because of their connections with the undead community. Fane, Marcus, Gavin, and Henry were among those on the safe list. I hope it stayed that way. I'd taken a big risk telling Fane about Aurora and me a couple weeks ago. It was either that or let her die when she'd been kidnapped by the vampire Renard.

Maybe I trusted him because Fane once stepped in when a vampire was hassling Whitney. My friends and I had all agreed afterwards that Fane belonged to a class of vampires we dubbed "gentlemen," even if he had hideous taste in women, specifically the redhead he'd been dating at the time: Valerie Ward.

I wondered if Fane found the taste of Valerie's blood off.

I tapped my fingers on my desktop.

"Earth to Noel," Aurora said.

I blinked my eyes back into focus. "Sorry," I said. "My mind drifted." Funny thing was Aurora used to be the spacey one, not me. She'd become Miss Studious since starting at West. I don't know; if it were me, a narrow escape from vengeful vampires out to maim and kill wouldn't put homework and studying high on my list.

"Never mind. I probably don't want to know," Aurora said.

That I'd been thinking about Valerie and Fane. "Probably not."

Mrs. Campbell walked in, which meant the bell would ring any second.

"You should have lunch with Gavin, Henry, and me sometime," I said. Right before we left Denali High, Aurora had eaten lunch with Whitney, Hope, and me. Apparently her skipping days were over, but everyone needed to eat.

"Yeah, thanks, but lunch hour is when I get a head start on homework." Aurora's forehead wrinkled when she frowned. "I need all the time I can get, especially when I have Melcher calling me in after school." Aurora huffed and closed her book.

"You, too?" I asked.

Aurora turned her head sharply to look at me as the bell rang.

"At least we can carpool," I said before Mrs. Campbell began roll call.

Agent Crist narrowed her eyes the moment Aurora and I walked inside the agents' office after school. I don't know why she had to look at us like that. I suppose it had something to do with not wanting to get close to operatives

who might not survive their next mission. That's something I could understand. I had a tendency to distance myself emotionally from my friends Whitney and Hope. I tried to steer them toward friendly vampires, but I couldn't monitor their activities around the clock.

Valerie sat in a chair by the far wall inspecting her nails while Dante, one of Melcher's male vampire hunters, leaned against the wall fiddling with a bear claw hanging on a leather cord around his neck.

I took the seat beside Aurora in front of Agent Crist's desk. The last time the agents called us all in together, it'd been because Valerie suspected Aurora of being a vampire. It was when my own suspicions were confirmed that my new friend was, in fact, a hunter, saved and called to duty after her horrific car accident last November. Lucky for Aurora, she had AB negative blood—otherwise she would have ended up at the morgue.

"Listen up, everyone," Agent Melcher said. I turned my attention to him. "We have a situation. Two nights ago, a pizza delivery boy went missing from Midnight Pie. He was found near Westchester Lagoon yesterday morning by a jogger."

"Dead?" Aurora asked.

Valerie huffed. "Of course, dead! Did you forget to take your brain pills again?"

Melcher cleared his throat. "A vampire, or more likely several, drained everything they could out of the boy before dumping him."

"How many puncture wounds on the body?" Dante asked.

"No bite marks," Melcher said. "They wouldn't want to draw that kind of attention to themselves. They used knives. I'd say they most likely slit the boy's throat first, stabbed him in several key arteries, and then slit his wrists."

I focused on the edge of Agent Crist's desk. I didn't look up until Melcher was halfway through his next speech.

"I'm putting you into teams of two."

"No problem," Dante interjected. "Sky and I have got this."

Melcher frowned at Dante. "I'm putting you and Aurora on probation."

"What? Why?" Dante asked.

"You got an informant and a boy killed," Crist said impatiently.

Melcher laced his fingers, resting them on his desktop. "And you left Aurora alone on her first mission."

"A successful mission. She killed Patrick and Ivo."

"Beginner's luck," Valerie said under her breath.

Melcher's brows lowered, meeting his lashes. He didn't take his eyes off Dante.

"You also came this close to getting Aurora killed when Renard came looking for her in town." Melcher cleared his throat. "Dante, I'm pairing you with Noel. Aurora, you're with Valerie."

My heart gave a tiny leap after hearing my name. I glanced from Aurora to Valerie. They both immediately scowled.

"I expect all of you to work together professionally," Melcher said. No one spoke up. "Good."

I didn't care who I worked with. I preferred working alone as an informant. In fact, I'd never worked with anyone. I hoped this didn't become a reoccurring event.

"Now that that's settled, we'll go over your instructions."

Agent Crist pulled a drawer open on her desk. She stood, holding a stack of thin blue and white pamphlets. She came around her desk and handed me a small stack. While she moved around the room, I looked at the cover.

JESUS LOVES YOU!

An oval in the center depicted the typical Jesus caricature: Caucasian man with shoulder-length brown hair, wearing a white robe. This picture showed him blessing a baby.

"I don't think we can pray the vampires away," Dante said, chuckling as Crist handed him some pamphlets.

She frowned in response.

Once Crist reseated herself, Melcher resumed talking. "We have five residential addresses. They all ordered pizza delivery from the victim's employer, and they all called in a complaint when they never received their order. We believe one of the addresses is a vamp house. You will use the pamphlets Crist handed out as an excuse to knock on each door and get a feel for each resident. Trust your instincts. If you feel you've come upon a person of suspicion, insist on entering the premises and investigate. Dante and Noel, I'm giving you three of the addresses."

Dante gave a whoop.

Melcher stood and leaned over his desk to hand Dante a sheet of paper. "Aurora and Valerie, you get the remaining two."

Valerie had already stepped up to Melcher's desk to take the list before Melcher finished speaking. Aurora remained seated, arms folded across her chest.

"If it turns out that one of your addresses houses vampires, I want my hunters to position themselves for feeding. Your duty, your only duty tonight, is to do the poisoning," Melcher said looking between Dante and Aurora. "After which I want you to step aside and let your partner go in for the kill."

"No way," Dante said. "I'm all about follow up."

"You're lucky we're sending you back in the field at all," Agent Crist said.

"One more thing," Melcher said. "I don't want either you or Aurora carrying a weapon."

"What if our partner chokes?" Dante demanded.

"I won't choke," Valerie said.

"Neither will I," I said quickly. Thanks a lot, Dante. It was one thing to think it, but to say it in front of everyone—not cool.

"Dante," Melcher said patiently. "Your blood is your weapon and both

my informants are highly trained."

Damn straight. Being short gave me better access when doing a move I called "The Nut Cruncher." Maybe Dante needed a demo.

"No weapons, no killing. Roger that," Dante said. "When do we get started?"

"Immediately," Melcher said.

I lifted off my seat. No time like the present. It beat going back to the apartment.

Valerie bumped into me on the way out of the office. "Excuse you," I said.

"Good luck, Noel," Valerie said. "You're going to need all the prayers you can get seeing as the vamps gutted the last informant who worked with Dante."

"I'll be fine, but thanks for your concern." Bitch. Why did someone like Valerie Ward have to share the same blood type with me? Nature fucked up on that one.

Aurora joined my side, glaring at Valerie's back. "And I have to work with her."

Now that would royally suck.

Valerie spun on her heel. "Are you coming or what?"

"What does it look like?" Aurora shot back.

Dante joined us in the hall, calling out, "Did somebody order a dead vampire, hold the anchovies?"

Aurora shook her head. "He's all yours."

I think Dante would have been better off with Valerie. Let those two squabble over the knife. But I didn't make the decisions, and ultimately, Melcher knew best.

Dante looked me up and down. "You're so tiny. Are you sure you can take on a full-grown vampire?"

I lifted my chin. "No problem."

"Follow me to the first house, unless you want to leave your car on base."

"Right behind you," I said. I stared at the slip of paper in Dante's hand and committed the first address to memory.

"Got it?" Dante asked.

"Yep."

"Cool, I'm in the white Jeep."

I got one last look at Aurora in the parking lot before she climbed into Valerie's shiny red Honda Civic. Poor girl.

I walked to the end of the parking lot and climbed into my car. After starting her up, I turned the vent to full blast even though the heater was on the fritz. Didn't matter. I'd been born with ice in my veins.

Once my windshield unfogged, I turned the vent to half-speed.

I saw a white Jeep waiting at the exit. As soon as I pulled up behind the

Jeep, Dante headed out of the lot. I followed him along the wooded road. It always felt so peaceful on base. A city within the city. Sheltered. Safe. Until we reached the main road leading up to the gated entrance, there were hardly any vehicles on the road.

The Jeep zoomed onto the highway. The heater wasn't the only thing on the fritz. The old girl didn't respond well to the gas pedal.

I watched the Jeep careen through traffic like an out-of-control snowball rolling down a cliff. Good thing Melcher didn't pair Aurora with Dante. She'd probably be shitting herself right about now.

Downtown was just ahead. Dante punched it through the first intersection as the light turned yellow. Even if I wanted to run a red, I couldn't with cars blocking every lane.

Didn't matter. I had the address in my head. Melcher once told me he wanted me to get to know the whole city like the back of my hand. So I'd studied city maps until I knew Anchorage better than any pizza delivery boy ever could.

I turned the FM radio on to an alternative rock station. The light turned green. I moved with the flow of traffic in no rush. When "Sail" by AWOLNATION came on, I sang along, watching the SUV in front of me.

The streets unclogged after the next intersection. I passed a park with play equipment covered in snow and took a right into one of the nicer neighborhoods in town. Not the kind of place where I expected killer vampires to reside.

Dante's Jeep idled directly in front of our first address. I parked a couple houses behind him and walked toward his car. He jumped out and met me halfway, shooting me a mischievous grin. "Hey, you made it."

"This is the address, isn't it?"

"Yeah." Dante cocked his head to one side and squinted as though trying to get a read on me.

"Then let's go."

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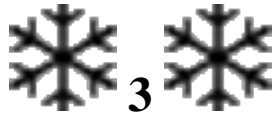

3
Can't Win Them All

"What do you think?" Dante asked as we tromped up the walkway. "Vamp house?"

"We'll find out." I walked up to the door and knocked three times.

A woman in an embroidered sweater answered. She smiled sweetly. "May I help you?"

"Good afternoon, Ma'am," Dante said, cheeks dimpling when he grinned. "I hope we're not interrupting anything. We were just in the neighborhood, spreading the word of the Lord and wondered if we might have a moment of your time?"

The woman gave me a dubious look. It's not as though I'd had time to change out of my black skirt with the tulle trim. At least she couldn't see my corset beneath my zipped hoodie.

When the woman's eyes returned to Dante she was all smiles. "We love the Lord and all those who spread His word. I just made cookies. Won't you come inside a moment and warm up? Even God's servants need to take breaks."

Dante took a step forward. "Cookies? You've twisted my arm."

I followed Dante wordlessly inside the house. Like I said, I wasn't in any hurry to get back to my crib.

"I hope you like chocolate chip," the woman said, disappearing behind a wall, leaving us inside an immaculately clean living room. Cleanliness on that level had its own creepy factor.

"Chocolate chip is my favorite," Dante said. He sunk into a cushion on the sofa, draping an arm over the rest.

I took a seat beside him.

"One down. Two to go," Dante said.

The woman returned with two pink plastic plates – a cookie on each. She handed one to Dante and me.

"Thanks," I said.

"What are your names?" the woman asked.

"I'm Peter and this is Wendy," Dante answered.

"Nice to meet you Peter and Wendy. I'm Katherine."

"Well, Katherine, we certainly appreciate your hospitality."

"Please," Katherine said. "It's the least I could do. Which church are you two from?"

I ate my cookie and let Dante have the floor. He seemed to have a knack for on the spot bullshiting.

"Actually we attend church in Palmer," Dante said.

He was good on his feet all right. There was a church on practically

every street corner in Palmer. Alaska might not be part of the Bible Belt, but it had a few notches.

"How wonderful," the woman said. "Which one?"

Dante chewed his cookie for a while. Finally he answered, "The Church of God."

I looked at Katherine. She thought a moment then smiled. "Oh, yes. That's the one off the highway, isn't it?"

"That's the one," Dante said, grinning as he bit into his cookie.

I set my plate on the spot beside me then stood up. "Mind if I use your bathroom?"

"Down the hall to the left," Katherine said. "How long are you in town?" she asked, turning her attention back to Dante.

"Only a couple days."

"We're having a potluck tomorrow at the church. I'd love for you to come..."

Their voices faded as I walked down the hall of smiling portraits. They were all studio shots of the family—everyone dressed their best with matching smiles in front of holiday backdrops.

I slipped inside the bathroom, shutting the door behind me. I opened all the drawers, medicine cabinet, and cupboard beneath the sink. The drawers were lined with hair products, nail polish, menstrual pads, and every type of headache medication on the planet. I closed everything again and returned to the living room.

"Ready?" Dante said, standing up.

I gave a slight nod.

"Well, Katherine, thank you again for letting us in and for the delicious cookies."

"God bless you both," Katherine replied.

"And you," Dante said, making the sign of the cross.

Katherine's head gave a slight jerk.

I touched Dante's arm. "Come on, Pete, we have work to do."

Dante followed me to the door. "Duty calls. Good evening, Katherine." Dante caught up to me on the walkway. "What was that about?"

I smirked. "You made the sign of the cross. That's a Catholic thing."

"Is the Church of God not Catholic?"

I shrugged. "Beats the hell out of me."

"You should ride with me," Dante said. "It would be faster."

"Or you could ride along with me."

"I said faster."

"Fine."

Dante walked around the front of the Jeep, into the street, and climbed in. I stood staring at the passenger's seat. Small golden hairs covered the fabric and would no doubt stick to my black clothes the moment I sat down.

"What?" Dante asked.

I sighed and climbed in. “I take it you have a dog?”

“Tommy? He’s sitting this one out.” Dante started the Jeep. He put his blinker on and drove cautiously through the neighborhood before ripping out onto the main road and punching the gas. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him glance my way. I stifled a yawn.

“I think we’re going to hit the jackpot at the next place,” Dante said.

“Why’s that?”

“Just a hunch.”

“We might not get the vamp house at all,” I pointed out.

“The odds are in our favor.” Dante held the horn down when a car pulled out of a parking lot in front of him.

I looked from the road to Dante. “Why do you want the vamp house so bad?”

Dante cranked the wheel at the next intersection. I leaned toward him to prevent slamming my shoulder against the door.

“It’s exciting,” Dante said. “Like being a real life superhero. The more vamps I take down, the safer the world is.”

I smiled. What our unit did was pretty damn impressive. I didn’t get as hyper about it, but it gave me a similar sense of satisfaction. Unlike Aurora, I valued my position on the team. It gave me a sense of purpose my life lacked before.

Dante’s next words didn’t register immediately. He must have thought I was feeling anxious. “Don’t worry, I’ll do the killing. No one has to know.”

I turned my head to look at him. “What makes you think I can’t take this vamp out myself?”

Dante made a snorting sound I didn’t appreciate. “Have you even killed a vampire before?”

“Yes.”

“I mean outside of orientation.”

I pressed my lips together.

No.

And I hadn’t killed my vampire during orientation the first time around, either. He nearly killed me. I had to have another transfusion and go through the whole process again with a second vampire. In the first round, Melcher had confirmed his hypothesis that people with AB positive blood couldn’t poison vampires the way AB negative blood could. Our blood didn’t mix right with the toxin or something.

Luckily the department still had a use for me. I was happier as an informant anyway.

But before I could be put on active duty, I still had to kill my first vampire.

“I’m putting you on undercover duty, Noel,” Melcher had said. “Your job is not only to observe, but become a part of the vampire community. But you must also know how to defend yourself against these creatures. And you

must be prepared to kill them if necessary."

So he'd assigned me a month of intensive training before pitting me against another rabies vampire. That time I was ready, and I knew what to expect. I couldn't rely on my blood. I had to rely on my skills. In the end, I'd chosen a knife. After all, it wasn't the first time I'd used one.

"You can count on me," I told Dante.

"Keep your eye out for one-one-eight," Dante said when he pulled into the next neighborhood.

I scanned the homes quickly. "There," I said.

Dante hit the break then pulled up to the curb. One-one-eight was across the street. They had a snowman in the front yard with twig hands, a knit hat, and scarf. So much for Dante's hunch.

He turned the ignition off and reached across me for the glove box. There was a sheathed knife inside. Dante grabbed it.

I didn't say a word, and I wouldn't to Melcher, either. If Dante needed to hold onto his knife to feel secure, he could do whatever he damn well wanted. Nothing would stop me from doing my job.

"Are you armed?" Dante asked.

I rolled my eyes. "Do vampires suck blood?"

He glanced from my legs to my face. "Where is it?"

"Under my skirt."

Dante smiled slowly. "So how do you access it?"

"I lift up my skirt," I answered.

Dante's grin widened. He glanced at my legs again. "You should teach Aurora that trick."

Okay, someone needed to get his mind back on the mission.

"I imagine she's got her own tricks up her sleeve." I reached for the door handle.

"Ah, but a trick up the skirt beats a trick up the sleeve any day of the week," Dante answered. I rolled my eyes again.

Dante slipped his knife halfway down the front of his pants and zipped up his jacket. "All right, let's go get this blood sucker."

I glanced dubiously at the house across the street. Well, whatever. No vampire I'd ever met would be caught dead making a snowman, but Dante obviously thought we were onto something.

I slammed my door shut and followed Dante up to the house. He paused in front of the snowman to look back at me. "You see that?"

"What?" I asked.

"They used blood to draw a mouth."

"Or food coloring."

Dante turned abruptly and stormed the front steps of the porch. He looked at the door knocker and then at me, raising a brow as though pointing out an obvious clue. I squinted at the knocker. Nope, nothing demonic about it, just a typical brass handle.

Dante curled his fingers around the knocker and pounded the door twice. We waited.

And waited.

The jingle of a dog leash rattled behind us. A woman passed the house with her German Shepard.

"I don't think anyone's home," I said.

Dante had his fingers on his chin, stroking his lower lip. "They're home, all right. Hiding out is what they're doing."

"You think so?"

Instead of answering, Dante turned abruptly and took the stairs down to the yard. He started walking across the snow-covered lawn to the tall wood fence surrounding the backyard.

I followed the footsteps he'd made in the snow and joined Dante in front of the gate.

As Dante lifted the latch, a dog snarled from behind the fence. I took a step back.

"Nice touch," Dante said. "They got themselves a guard dog. What we need is a steak... and I don't mean the kind made out of wood." Dante immediately laughed at his own joke.

Now that the dog was aware of our presence, he'd gone ballistic—lunging at the fence and snarling. My eardrums protested with each piercing bark.

"Maybe we should check out the third address then come back?" I suggested.

Dante shook his head. "No good. They know we're here now. If we leave they're gonna flee."

I glanced across the street. Lights were on inside the surrounding houses, but not this one.

Dante's phone rang inside his jacket. The dog barked louder. Dante fished his phone out, looked at the screen, and answered. "It's Dante. What's that? Really? Luck be a lady."

I don't know how he could hear or have a conversation with that animal going off like a broken car alarm.

Dante slipped his phone inside his jacket pocket. "That was Agent Crist. She said Aurora and Valerie got the vamp house. They want us all to return immediately." Dante shrugged. "Can't win 'em all."

After Melcher's debriefing, I returned home and pulled into an empty spot along the curb, scanning the street for Broncos of any color.

Before stepping out of the vehicle, my phone rang. I pulled it out of my backpack and glanced at caller ID before answering. "Hey, Whit."

"Hey, you little hussy," she answered back.

"What's up?"

"Besides the fact that I'm not speaking to you for leaving in the middle of the year?"

I chuckled. "How's that going for you?"

"It was going fine until I heard a bit of gossip too juicy to keep to myself."

"So spill."

"Fine, you know I can't stay mad at you forever, but just so you know, you're still on probation."

"Fine. Now, what happened?"

"Word is Valerie Ward broke up with Fane."

"Oh, yeah?" I reached into my backpack for a piece of gum.

"I figured Aurora would want to know. You still hang out with her, right? Out there at your suck-ass new school."

"Yeah, we see each other in film class."

"I'm sure this piece of information will make her happy," Whitney said.

I stopped chewing. "Aurora broke up with Fane—not the other way around. She had her reasons."

"Really?" Whitney's voice lifted. "Does that mean Fane's up for grabs?"

I snorted. "Good luck with that." Maybe I should have been more encouraging, but this was Fane Donado we were talking about. He didn't date junkies... or any girl under five seven.

Whit always did have a thing for Fane. We met him at one of Marcus' parties at the end of sophomore year. When Fane actually said hello to us in the hallway the following week at school, Whitney had nearly fainted with excitement. Vampires had celebrity status in her eyes.

"Is it because I'm a lowerclassman?" Whitney asked.

"Something like that," I said between chewing.

"Oh well, there's always next year."

"Hey," I said suddenly. "You and Hope should come by Marcus's this Friday night."

"Or you could wander over to the east side."

I missed my friends, but they definitely were not worth hitting up the east scene. Besides, one of my first instructions as an undercover informant had been to keep an eye on Marcus.

"You should come downtown. Gavin misses you guys," I said. Not a big stretch. Gavin had asked about them, and he did say Marcus needed more warm bodies. Might as well be Whitney and Hope opposed to those crows Henry had rounded up at West High.

"He does?" Whitney asked, her voice perking up once more. "And Henry?"

"Him, too."

"In that case, wouldn't want to disappoint them."

"Nope," I said, tossing my gum wrapper inside my bag. "Never

disappoint a vampire."

"Or a good friend."

"Aw," I said. "You're so sweet."

"And you're such a bitch for leaving us, but we still love you."

"Admit it. I'm irresistible."

Whitney responded, but I only half-listened. My thoughts unwittingly shifted to Gavin. If only I were irresistible to him. It was pretty challenging to entice a guy, as I was a shorty without hips, curves, height, or a chest to speak of.

Maybe that's why Melcher had never asked me to seduce or date a vampire.

After getting off the phone with Whitney, I stepped gingerly onto the icy street, holding my keys in my fist. As I walked toward my building, I heard the rumble of a car come from behind me. I stepped up to the sidewalk, quickening my pace. The car slowed as it neared me, sending my heart into panic mode.

Every instinct screamed at me to run for the front entrance, but I turned my head, slowing my steps in the process. The Bronco had returned. Clive drove alongside me. I didn't see his face until he rolled down the passenger's window. "Hello, Noel."

I'd faced two rabid vampires and killed one. Every time I stepped inside the palace I put my life at risk, but none of that compared to the terror I felt at the sound of his drawn out, nasally voice.

My stomach tightened instantly.

The street was deserted, but the entrance wasn't far. I ran as fast as I could while avoiding icy patches on the pavement.

"I'm not done talking to you," Clive called after me.

Well, I was done listening to him. I didn't have to answer to the jerk anymore.

The car sped up and came to a stop in front of the building. A door slammed. I ripped open the front door and ran past the wall of metal mailboxes. When I reached the locked door at the end of the entryway, I forced myself to slow down enough to pluck the correct key from the ring in my palm and push it steadily inside the lock.

The outside door flew open at the same time I unlocked the second door and wrenched it toward me. I slipped through like a mouse squeezing between a narrow gap and pulled the door shut using my entire body. It clicked in place as Clive advanced on me. Only a pane of glass separated us, but I'd gotten through in time.

He didn't reach for the handle. He'd never make a fool of himself that way, knowing the door was locked. Instead he smiled and ran a hand through his thick, wavy hair. I'd forgotten how diabolical those lips looked no matter which way they turned.

"So, this is where you ran off to," he said through the glass. He glanced

around the entryway, his head turning slowly to look at the scratches etched in the mailboxes. One had stickers peeling on the outside. His eyes drifted to the stained carpet. Clive looked up at me. “At least you’re not at a halfway house or under a bridge.”

Walk away, Noel. I didn’t have to listen to this. Not anymore.

I took a step backward. Clive’s eyes narrowed. “We’re not done here, Noel.”

“Yes, we are,” I said, finding my voice and immediately regretting that I’d used it. It always ended up sounding shaky when I spoke to Clive.

He heard it, too. I could tell from his smug smile.

Clive moved up to the glass door. “You need help, Noel. You need family. If you don’t come home you’re only going to hurt yourself again.”

I lifted my fist, slow and deliberate, and flipped Clive off.

I’d wanted to do that my whole life. Nothing like a pane of glass separating me from the devil to provide a false sense of courage. A smile sprang to my lips. Damn, that felt good. Should have flipped the asshole off years ago.

Clive’s face turned red and began creasing around his eyes and lips. I turned quickly and hurried down the hallway before I could see the beast come out of hiding.

Trudy and Michelle were both working that night, leaving me trapped in the apartment alone. I locked the door as I’d done a hundred times before and tried turning the knob just to be sure. I’d learned how to shoot a gun in training. Now I was regretting not owning my own piece. Not that I could shoot Clive.

I wanted him dead, but I’d rather his car careen off a cliff or he get pneumonia or mad cow or whooping cough. The scoundrel didn’t have AB positive or negative blood, thank God, so he couldn’t come back as a vampire. Then again, that would give me a reason to kill him.

I kept the apartment lights off, avoiding the kitchen window even as my stomach grumbled for a snack. All I’d eaten since lunch was a cookie and a piece of gum.

“Thanks a lot, Clive,” I said sarcastically. Talking out loud helped, especially when using my snarky, don’t give a shit, voice.

I took a seat on my bed and scrolled through email to see if anyone had answered my rent inquiries.

What was Clive doing bothering me on a school night? School night meant work night, which meant he should go live his own fucked-up life and leave me the hell alone!

“Go away, Clive,” I said to the open doorway.

I tossed my phone on my bed before crawling on all fours from my room to Trudy and Michelle’s across the hall, stopping momentarily to shake my head and laugh bitterly. “This is sad, Noel. Look at you.”

I straightened out slowly and approached the edge of the window.

The Bronco was in the same spot it had been idling the night before.

"Just great."

I backed up to Michelle and Trudy's closet and began pushing through the hangers. What I needed was a disguise.

What I needed were normal clothes.

My roommates weren't as petite as me, but they were skinny and wore tight clothing. I pulled a white turtleneck off a hanger.

I took the turtleneck to the bathroom and set it on the counter while I yanked at the strings on my corset. While I was at it, I tugged off the tulle skirt and unfastened the sheath around my waist. After nabbing a pair of blue jeans from my room, I pulled the turtleneck over my head and stared into the mirror.

I gathered all my hair over one shoulder.

Not the sexiest girl on the block, but I wasn't anything to sneeze at, either. I had flawless skin for one thing and not an ounce of body fat. There were girls who'd kill to be a size zero. I turned sideways and scrutinized my profile in the mirror.

I pulled the turtleneck off before tossing it into the clothes pile beside by my bed.

Gavin whistled as I walked up to his lunch table the next day. "Looking good, Noel."

Luckily I didn't have the type of skin that flushed easily. "Thanks," I said. "Just something I had lying around."

Henry leaned over the table, grinning all the while. "I think you look beautiful no matter what you wear."

Henry may have used the word "beautiful," but Gavin's "good" still had more impact.

"Did you receive Marcus's invitation?" Henry asked, never breaking eye contact.

Gavin snorted and looked upward before turning his focus to the table.

I looked in Gavin's direction. "The candy was a nice touch."

Gavin smiled. "So, you're going?"

"Yeah. You?"

"Wouldn't miss it."

Henry looked between the two of us. "You seem happy here at West, Noel."

"It's not bad," I answered. "But I miss my friends. I did talk them into making an appearance at Marcus's this Friday."

Henry clapped his hands and rubbed them together. "Excellent. We'll have to show them what they've been missing, won't we Gavin?"

I don't know what kind of expression Gavin had on his face because I

wasn't looking at either vampire. My stomach had bottomed out at Henry's comment. Gavin had sucked blood from Whitney and Hope before—no big deal. Except it made me want to un-invite them both the moment school finished.

I tried to paste a bored expression over my face. Usually bluffing came naturally to me. At that moment, I felt like stabbing something, and I just had to hope it didn't show.

"Do you think Aurora will ever brave the palace again?" Henry asked.

Getting kidnapped and tortured did put a damper on things.

"You haven't seen the last of Aurora," I said. "She's tough."

"But not as tough as you, Black Bear," Gavin said with a wink.

The thump, thump, thumping in my chest started anew. I wanted like crazy to invite Gavin back to my apartment right now. Henry's sly gaze snapped me out of it.

"Well, we ought to head to our lockers, don't you think, Gavin?"

Gavin glanced at the wall clock before saying, "Yeah, sure." He smiled at me. "Too bad we don't have any classes together."

"Sucks," I said.

Henry scooted back. "See you tomorrow." I didn't have any classes with him, either.

"Don't study too hard," I said.

Henry's lips lifted as though he might laugh. He patted my shoulder. "Take it easy."

As I watched Gavin walk away, I decided I didn't care if he hadn't been assigned to me—I was assigning him to myself. My personal life wasn't any of the agents' business. Odds were the men I'd meet would be vampires since that's who I was required to spend my time with. Well, every job deserved perks.

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4
Here Comes Trouble

Whitney and Hope showed up at my apartment early Friday evening. We ordered pizza and drank hard lemonade that I'd purchased with my fake ID. Standard issue perk.

It was great to have my girls with me, but as we pulled up to the palace, I suddenly wished I was going in alone.

What if Gavin did ask one of them to accompany him upstairs?

My jaw clenched. I relaxed into a smile as we entered the palace. The lighting inside was dim, cozy, romantic—perfect for making out.

I hadn't come armed tonight. No knives or mace. Tonight, I was after something else entirely.

I'd worn one of my favorite black sleeveless dresses. It had ruffles around the trim of the straps and bodice, which added a visual boost around my chest. A purple plaid pattern filled in the front from just below the bust line, ending at my thighs in a layer of black lace. I'd gone without stockings. Tonight I was all smooth, white skin beneath the hem of my dress. My arm warmers were laced up to my elbows, and I'd pulled up half my hair and clipped in a few purple hair extensions to match the plaid.

I watched the floor as we entered, making sure I didn't trip in my black pumps on the stone entryway. Marcus had imported the stones straight from Jerusalem.

"Toto, we aren't in Kansas anymore," Whitney said.

Hope sniggered. "I'd nearly forgotten the Land of Oz."

"Bram Stoker's Oz," I said with a smirk.

Whitney and Hope chortled. In that moment, I was truly happy to have them by my side. We'd always played off of each other well. That was something I missed at West—gal pals. No amount of male cuteness could replace the bonds of friendship.

Over Hope's shoulder, Marcus smiled from the living room, taking languid steps toward us. His movements were as smooth as the silk shirt draped over his body. I doubted the man owned a single pair of blue jeans or a T-shirt.

"My three dark mice, together again," Marcus said, taking us all in at once.

"Hello, Marcus," Whitney said. "We've missed you."

Marcus angled himself until the silk of his shirt was nearly rubbing against Whitney's arm. "I hear I have competition on the east side."

Whitney glanced at me quickly.

Marcus moved in closer. "What do they have that I don't?"

"Spice," I answered before Whitney could respond.

She glared at me.

Marcus's eyebrows shot up. He shook his head. "So the mice have gotten a taste of poison?"

Whitney and Hope looked at the ground.

"I prefer simple pleasures, myself," Marcus said. "Fine wine and art; champagne and appetizers; beautiful people and a room with a view."

I smirked. "Simple pleasures?"

Marcus winked. "Perhaps some of the fine gentleman here this evening can help remind your friends what it's like to enjoy the simple pleasures. I expect Henry and Gavin anytime. Until then, please, help yourselves to a cocktail. As you know, I specialize in liquids. I'm sure you'll find something to satisfy." Marcus bowed slightly.

"Thanks a lot, Noel," Whitney said, smacking me on the shoulder once Marcus turned away.

"He thinks we're total druggies," Hope said.

I shrugged. "You are druggies. Maybe you should rethink smoking something that could make you eat someone's face off."

Hope's lip curled back.

"Don't give me that look," I said. "I told you that shit was fucked up. What happened to alcohol and vampires? We used to have fun."

"Right, the simple pleasures," Whitney said rolling her eyes.

"Here's the thing," Hope said. "A vampire gets off on biting us. Our blood is like a drug when it enters their system, right? But what about us?"

Whitney placed a hand on her hip. "Yeah, what about us? Bullshit is what I say. We get bit and provide the rush. Where's our rush?"

I looked from Whitney to Hope, unsure how to respond. "The biting and sucking is the rush," I said. It was for me, anyway. Something thrilling came over me every time a vampire sucked blood from my vein. I wasn't looking for a mind altering experience. I guess that was where my friends and I differed. I got off on the sexual nature of the exchange. Maybe that wasn't their thing.

"Tonight you agreed to come out with me, so we're doing things my way," I said. "And that begins with a cocktail."

"Fine," Whitney said. "Have it your way... tonight." She smiled at the last part, arms relaxing. My girls didn't hold grudges. The drug thing sucked, but they were my friends come hell or high water.

We walked into the kitchen where a young man in a dress shirt and pants greeted us from behind a counter. Rows of liquor bottles, lime wedges, salt, and sugar bowls were set before him.

"You three look thirsty," Marcus's makeshift bartender said. "You name it, I'll make it."

I elbowed Whitney. "Bet the east vamps don't have their own bartender."

Whitney jabbed me back. "Nice try."

Too bad she missed the topless waiter or she might have sang a different

tune.

"Oh, what the hell?" Hope said, stepping ahead of us. "Surprise me—just so long as it's something strong."

"Make that two," Whitney said.

"Three," I called out. "No sissy drinks."

We chuckled as the bartender pulled out a bottle of brandy, rum, and gin. He tossed a glass into the air, caught it, and set it down on the counter followed by two more. Once all three were lined up, he began pouring the liquor.

Whitney, Hope, and I took our drinks into the living room, selecting a spot on a leather couch.

I took my first sip.

"That's strong."

Hope chugged down her Dying Bastard. "Who says we can't get fucked up tonight?"

"Cheers to that," Whitney said, lifting her glass. She shot me a sly smile. "Simple pleasures, right?"

"Right," I said, sipping my drink.

Whitney lowered her glass. "Don't look now. Bitch alert."

I followed Whitney's gaze across the room, where Valerie stood perched against the spiral staircase's iron banister with a crystal champagne flute in her hand. One of Marcus's regulars stood close enough to have a bird's eye view down her plunging tank top.

While I'd been drinking and talking, I'd missed the redheaded banshee's arrival. Because of Valerie Ward I no longer went to school with my friends. Melcher had suddenly decided he didn't want two informants in one school. Naturally, Valerie refused to transfer.

"What's she doing here?" Whitney asked.

"Probably looking for her next conquest," I said.

"I still don't see how Fane went out with her... twice." Whitney's lips formed a pout.

"Probably some Freudian connection to red hair and blood," I said. "That or she sucked him off as good as he sucked her."

Hope sniggered.

"Eww! How dare you assault my mind," Whitney cried out.

I shrugged. "I call it like I see."

"And that's why we love you," Whitney said. "Even if you're a sick bitch."

I raised my eyebrows before taking a swig from my glass. I didn't realize I'd closed my eyes as I tilted my head back, not until Gavin appeared as if from thin air, standing at the lip of the living room the moment I swallowed. And his eyes were on mine.

Panic seized me and I nearly dropped my glass. I sucked in a breath, steadying my hand. Hope was finishing the last of her drink, but Whitney

didn't miss a beat. "Uh, oh," she said. "Here comes trouble."

Hope looked up and grinned when she saw who we were talking about. "I hope you brought concealer." She and Whitney sniggered.

I silently beseeched them to shut up.

"I see you're having a good time," Gavin said. He made it over before I could say something I'd later regret like, "He's taken."

"Hi, Gavin," Whitney said sweetly.

"Hello, Whitney. Hello, Hope." Gavin inched his way over to me and pressed his leg into the fabric of the couch just beside my bare knee. "Hey, Noel," he said softer.

My throat went dry. I didn't want him to see me swallow so I said a simple, somewhat breathless, "Hey," back.

"Whitney and Hope," I heard Henry call out behind Gavin. "How are you?"

He plopped onto the couch beside Hope, managing not to spill one drop of his drink.

"Doing great now that you're here," Whitney said back.

"Ah, I've missed that mouth of yours."

Whitney cocked her head to the side, showing off her neck. "And I've missed yours."

Whitney and Hope tittered. I might have joined them at another time, but I'd taken that opportunity to swallow down the Sahara Desert lodged inside my throat.

"Join me upstairs and I'll show you just how much you've been missing," Henry returned.

Whitney stood up. "Well, if you insist."

Henry rose to his feet after her.

Hope looked at Gavin expectantly, which made me leap to my own feet and nearly stumble on the three inch heels of my pumps. Gavin's hands shot out to steady me. His grip on my bare skin made me hum to life like a telephone wire.

I looked at Hope.

"Go," she said, waving a hand in the air. "I want to see what else this bartender can come up with."

"Thanks," I mouthed.

Gavin and I followed Henry and Whitney to the spiral staircase wordlessly. I'd nearly forgotten about Valerie's unwelcome appearance the moment Gavin arrived. Luckily she wasn't hanging over the banister any longer.

Whitney disappeared into the first available room with Henry—a silver bat dangling from their doorknob within seconds. Gavin headed straight for the October room. With every step, I felt my hormones and emotions raging into a fever pitch. I felt as though I'd never known hunger until now. Never known desire. Never known the anguish of wanting a boy to like me and only

me.

Gavin's steps didn't slow until we were three feet from the doorframe. When he turned around, I didn't allow myself time to think. Eyes half-closed, I went straight for the kiss. Gavin responded instantly, crushing his own lips against mine.

He spun me around, pressing me against the wall beside the open door, his hand gripping my waist then traveling down my thighs. I kissed him harder.

Gavin pulled me away from the wall and maneuvered me inside the October room, fumbling for the bat around the knob without breaking off the kiss. The silver bat knocked against the door as he looped it around the outer knob. Once secured, Gavin smacked the door shut.

"Noel," he whispered like a breath between kisses.

My name sounded like music coming off his lips.

I pressed my body against his, finding the proof protruding in his pants that he wanted me. Not my blood. Me. To be connected. To join in the most intimate act two beings could ever perform together.

Gavin's breath became ragged. His grip on me tightened, but I still wanted him to hold me tighter.

I ran my hand over the bulge in his pants. I felt him strain beneath my slim fingers.

Gavin caught my wrist and leaned forward until his eyes were inches from my own. "Someone's in a hurry," he said.

"We can't all live forever," I returned, pushing my hair behind my shoulder with my free hand.

Gavin's hand relaxed on my wrist. "I'd turn you if I could," he said.

I stopped messing with my hair and looked him in the eyes. "That's the nicest thing any vamp's ever said to me." And I thought Henry was the sweet talker. Gavin was full of surprises.

Gavin's expression changed, sending a shiver through me. He stepped closer, causing me to take an instinctive step back. Something akin to excitement flashed across Gavin's eyes. "Appearances can be deceiving. I've done things you can't begin to imagine, Noel. You should leave while you have the chance. I'm not sweet. Not at all."

Why were his words exciting, rather than scaring me?

"Good," I said. "Neither am I."

I didn't care that Gavin was a blood thirsting vampire. That was nothing compared to my current state of lust cravings. I didn't even have to worry about protection. Not only were vampires sterile, they couldn't pass on their disease; it festered within them. Forever. That reason alone made vampires perfect one night stands. Not that that's what I wanted this to be. Not even close.

Gavin stared straight into my eyes. I couldn't tell what he was thinking.

He smiled slowly and steered me over to the bed. With one small push he

had my butt planted on the edge of the mattress. Gavin placed a hand on either side of me and leaned forward.

My entire body quivered. Gavin slid his hands down my dress, fists tightening around the hemline. He began sliding the fabric up. It didn't have far to go before it was around my waist, exposing my black lace panties.

I could feel the pressure of his knuckles on my thighs. I wanted them gripping me, guiding the first thrusts of his dick.

A sharp knock at the door interrupted the direction of my thoughts. For several seconds, I stared slack-jawed at the door. We'd hung the bat. No one knocked when the bat was in place. Who was knocking? Why were they knocking?

Gavin let go of me and straightened up. Lines formed at the corner of his lips. He looked as annoyed as I felt. As he turned around, I pulled my dress down and stood up.

Gavin stormed across the room with me following close behind. He yanked open the door. Suddenly, his shoulders relaxed. At first I couldn't see over him, so I craned my head around his body, instantly scowling when I caught sight of Valerie. What the hell was she doing knocking on a closed door with a bat in place? She'd accompanied Fane to the palace before. She knew how things worked.

"I'm sorry to bother you," Valerie said sweetly. "You're one of Fane's friends, right?"

"Yeah. Gavin. We met at Marcus's Halloween party last year."

Valerie made a show of pursing her lips in thought. I also remembered Valerie at that party dressed as a slutty nurse. She'd waltzed into the palace and announced, "No biting, gentlemen, I'm with Fane. Besides, it's my job to take blood, not give it."

Fane had seemed pretty cool so go figure how Valerie ensnared him. Like I said, the sex must have been mind-blowing. Most likely Valerie had been assigned to Fane, but that still didn't explain why he went for her.

"Oh, right, Halloween," Valerie said with a sultry chuckle, tilting forward.

If I could see cleavage from where I stood, that meant Gavin was definitely getting an eyeful.

I cleared my throat. "Was there something you wanted?"

Valerie looked around the room until her eyes settled on me. "Actually I need to talk to you."

I placed a hand on my hip. "And it couldn't wait?"

Valerie stared at me in response. I lifted my brows impatiently. She better explain herself or move along.

Gavin ran a hand through his hair and cleared his throat.

"Well, um, I'll let you two chat. See you downstairs, Noel."

My jaw clenched as Gavin retreated down the hall.

"What the hell, Valerie!" I said the moment Gavin was out of earshot.

She didn't look at me right away; her eyes were still following the path Gavin had taken. "You two together?"

"No we're not together."

"Good."

I narrowed my eyes. "Why is that good?"

"Because it's my job to monitor vampires... closely." Valerie shot me a sly smile. "I had an in with Fane until Aurora stumbled along and ruined everything. I'm looking for a replacement and that one's tasty."

My heart erupted into angry beats that kicked at my gut.

"You can't go after Gavin." No way.

Valerie squared her shoulders. "Why not?"

"Has Melcher authorized this?" I demanded.

"I don't need Melcher's approval. I'm doing exactly what's expected of me. You're not exactly in a position to argue, Noel." Valerie lifted her nose and looked down at me. "What would Melcher think about you fucking anything with fangs?"

I lifted my hand as though to slap her. I wanted to see the bitch cringe, but instead, her eyes lit up. The banshee probably liked S&M.

Voices from down the hall stopped me. A vamp named Tom walked up to the door with his arm draped around a skinny blonde. "You two coming or going?" he asked.

I looked at Valerie in disgust. Even if I played for the same team, Valerie would so not be my type.

"Going," I said, storming out of the room. At least as much as one can storm in pumps.

Valerie smirked and followed me out. Tom pulled the blonde into the October room and shut the door with a firm click. The bat knocked against the wood in the process. I'd never gotten a chance to move it to the other side of the door. I gave it one last wistful stare. That should have been me and Gavin inside the October room.

I looked up at Valerie and glared. "If you're looking for a pet project you shouldn't do it on my turf."

Valerie snorted. "Your turf? What is this? Westside Story?"

"You're the one who insisted on running with the Denali crowd, so you should stick to that side of town."

Valerie batted a loose curl hanging over her face.

"It's a free country," she answered.

There was no reasoning with the vixen.

"Fine. Go wherever you want. Just stay away from Gavin and don't ever interrupt me again."

I turned on my heel with a huff and stormed down the hallway, slowing down at the spiral staircase to take each step carefully. I wasn't about to allow anger to cause a misstep and wind up tumbling headfirst down the stairs. Valerie would love that.

The din from the living room filled my ears like white noise. The bodies below blurred together until one came into focus at the base of the staircase. Gavin.

He held a hand out. I took it and stepped down.

"What was that all about?" he asked, leaning into me. His touch had the power to erase the animosity swimming through my veins.

"Nothing," I said. "Sorry about the interruption."

Gavin nodded toward the kitchen. "Want a drink?"

"I'd love one."

We walked into the kitchen where the bartender from earlier was pouring two drinks for a vampire into martini glasses. Once the vamp had taken the glasses and left, the bartender looked at me and said, "You might want to check on your friend."

"Hope?" I asked immediately, even though that name would mean nothing to him.

"She's in the restroom."

I turned to Gavin. "I'll be right back."

He nodded. "I'm not going anywhere."

I forced a smile. Obviously the universe was conspiring against me this evening—that and the ghosts of high school past. This was one Denali High reunion party I could have done without. Things were so much simpler on my own.

The bathroom door was closed. I pounded on it. "Hope," I called. "Hope, are you in there?" There was no answer. I tried the doorknob, but it wouldn't budge. "Hope, open up!"

The knob turned and clicked. I pushed my way in, closing the door quickly behind me.

Hope stood shaking against the bathroom counter, eyes bloodshot. Behind her I saw a line of cocaine on the porcelain countertop. "What the hell are you doing? You know Marcus doesn't allow this shit at his place."

Guests had been banned for less, no second chances. I couldn't let Hope ruin everything for me. I locked the bathroom door and stormed over to the counter.

Hope sniffed. "You left me alone."

"Hey," I said, grabbing her roughly by the shoulders. "Don't blame this on me." I shook her. Rage seeped over my bones, and I shook her harder. Hope's eyes widened in surprise.

Hope's lower lip quivered. She nodded ever so slightly. I released her to swipe the white powder with one hand into another right before dumping it into the toilet.

"What are you doing?" Hope cried.

I flushed the toilet. "Getting you out of here before Marcus finds out what you've been up to."

I yanked a line of toilet paper from the roll, ripping it off and wadding it

up. I wet the wad and swiped it over the counter.

"Do you know how much that cost me?" Hope asked.

"Do I look like I give a shit?" I returned. "Come on," I said, grabbing her by the arm once the place looked cleaned up. Thankfully, we were near the front door. I popped my head out of the bathroom and, seeing the coast was clear, dragged Hope outside.

"What about Whitney?" Hope whined.

"I'll text her from the car." I hurried down the shoveled walkway, unlocked the Volvo, and shoved Hope into the backseat. Damn it. This wasn't how I'd imagined the evening going.

I pulled out my phone and texted Whitney. I wasn't ready to sit in the car with Hope just yet.

911. Meet me at the car.

I texted Gavin next. Sorry. Have to bail. Hope's sick.

I glanced at the pitch-black sky over my head. There weren't any stars to be seen, which meant a wall of clouds was crushing down over Anchorage. Fitting. I breathed the frigid air in and out until I felt calm enough to get inside the car.

Hope was shivering. I stuck my key inside the ignition and turned on the heat.

"Thanks," she said through quivering lips.

I looked down to see if I'd heard from either Gavin or Whitney. Gavin had texted back: See you at school. I thought about replying, but decided to leave it at that.

"Next time I'll behave," Hope said from the backseat.

I gave a noncommittal shrug, knowing all the while there'd be no next time for Hope. Not at the palace. I wouldn't risk being banned because of her or anyone else.

Despite the Valerie and Hope incident over the weekend, I went to school Monday morning feeling buoyant.

Clive and his diabolical Bronco had not appeared that weekend. Maybe he'd taken a hint when I gave him the finger... yeah, and maybe the NRA would take up scrapbooking.

I had more important things on my mind. Marcus's Valentine's party was at the end of the week. What better time to hook up with Gavin for the first time? We'd come too close for it not to happen, and I was counting down the hours until lunch.

"Happy Monday," Henry called out as I walked up to their table in the cafeteria. The Black Widows had flocked there once more, like vultures to a fresh corpse.

"Yeah," I said. "Back to the grind." I took the empty seat beside Gavin,

very aware of the proximity of our legs. We might have been interrupted at Marcus's party, but in my dreams that night there'd been no intrusion, no Valerie, no friend getting trashed in the bathroom, nothing but the firm mattress of the October room to fall back onto.

It felt risqué thinking these things with Gavin seated directly beside me.

He shot me a friendly smile. "How's Hope feeling?"

I suppressed a sigh. "Much better."

"Had a few too many?" Henry asked.

"Something like that."

The Black Widows exchanged looks. Wednesday rested her elbows on the table and slouched forward. "Sounds like some party."

"You should check it out." Henry said. "Weekend after next."

That's right, vultures, this Friday's Valentine's party was by invitation only. I loved it when Marcus threw one of those into the mix, especially since I was on the guest list.

I kept glancing at Gavin all through lunch. It was hard to say anything about what almost happened when we were surrounded by the corpse brides and Henry's watchful gaze.

The next day, I was more than happy to find Gavin and Henry at our lunch table minus the girls.

"Where are the vultures?" I asked, unable to mask the smile from my lips as I set my lunch on the table.

Henry's brows jumped as he grinned. "Now, now, Noel. Play nice."

"Sorry, it's not in my nature," I said for Gavin's benefit, hoping to remind him of our earlier word play over the weekend. But Gavin seem preoccupied with his phone.

"I predict you'll be BFFs by the end of the semester," Henry said.

"Want to bet on it?"

Henry leaned forward and grinned. "Sure. What about you, Gavin? Want in on the wager?"

Gavin didn't respond. He still had his eyes glued to his phone.

Henry cleared his throat.

Gavin looked up. "Yeah, sure." He looked over my shoulder. I followed his gaze to Aurora making her way to our table, paper lunch sack clutched at her side. Her long black hair flowed over her blue sweater.

"Wow, is that Aurora Sky?" Gavin said as she reached the table. "I almost forgot you go here."

"Have a seat," Henry said. "It's good to see you."

"Thanks." Aurora pulled a chair out beside me. Gavin wasn't the only one surprised to see her. I'd been trying to get her to have lunch with us since she first transferred.

"You and Fane going to Marcus's party Friday?" Henry asked.

Aurora stared at Henry a moment before dropping her gaze to the table. "I'm going."

"But you and Fane are still together?" Gavin asked, leaning onto the table.

Aurora glanced sideways at me. "Yeah," she said carefully.

To prevent vampires from biting her, Fane had been kind enough to maintain the lie that he and Aurora were going out.

"What are you wearing to the party?" I asked, quickly jumping in. "Red or black?"

"Red," Aurora answered. "What about you? I presume you're wearing black."

Henry laughed. "I'd be willing to put money on it."

Great, another wager.

I straightened up. "Black's my color."

"And you look great in it," Gavin said.

Heat flooded my insides. I felt like things were constantly jumping from cold to hot with Gavin. I smiled in thanks and turned back to Aurora. "Do you need a ride to the party?"

"That would be great. Do you mind picking me up in front of school? I told my mom I was going to the dance Friday night."

"No problem."

Henry and Gavin stood up. "See you ladies later."

"See you," I said, glancing briefly at Henry before my eyes settled on Gavin. He shot me one last smile before leaving the cafeteria.

Aurora looked from the guys to me. "I hope I didn't scare them away." She bit into her sandwich, chewed, swallowed, and asked, "What's up with you and Gavin, anyway? Is he ever going to ask you out, or are you friends with benefits?"

I rarely blushed, but I could feel color creeping into my cheeks like a sudden rash. I didn't want to be discussing my personal life, not even with Aurora. So I gave her a blasé answer right before I turned the tables.

"I wasn't sure if I should tell you this, but Whitney doesn't think Fane's with Valerie anymore."

Aurora put her sandwich down. Yep, that did the trick. Aurora scowled before saying, "Well, Whitney should get her facts straight. She told me they were back together."

"Because they were," I said. "For a day." And now Valerie was trolling the waters at the palace.

It was unfortunate that Aurora had gotten involved with a vampire, let alone one who'd been dating Valerie. Talk about bad luck.

"He's not worth it," I said. "Trust me. Neither of them are."

"Is Gavin?" Aurora asked.

"The difference is I don't let myself get emotionally attached," I said leaning back in my seat. I sounded so sincere I almost believed myself.

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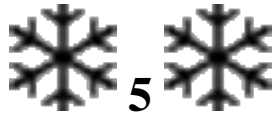

5
Red Rage

"Oh, crap!" I said to my reflection in the bathroom mirror, noticing what time it was the night of Marcus's party.

My makeup and hair were done, but I still needed to put on my dress, and I was supposed to pick Aurora up in front of school in two minutes. Tonight, I'd chosen matching red silk bra and panties. Who said I couldn't pull off both red and black? There were all kinds of surprises beneath the surface.

I grabbed my short black dress off the dresser, pulled it on over my head, clasped the Bite Me pendant around my neck, and hauled ass over to West High. Traffic didn't help. There was a school dance that evening. You couldn't pay me to go to one of those.

I spotted Aurora pacing the sidewalk.

"Sorry!" I called out the moment Aurora slipped inside the car. "I didn't notice the time."

"Don't worry about it," Aurora said evenly. She didn't look too pleased, but for all I knew that had nothing to do with me and everything to do with Fane.

"Are you going to be okay tonight?" I asked. The last time Aurora went to the palace, she left against her will.

As though reading my thoughts, she answered, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger. Besides, I deserve a night off after The Great Pizza Caper. I helped rid the world of not one, not two, but three killers, and I had to put up with Valerie in the process."

I snorted. "That's what I call fighting fire with fire."

Hopefully Valerie didn't show tonight because it wouldn't be much of a night off for Aurora if she did.

Marcus's place wasn't far from the school. He lived directly beside the coastal trail. We buzzed through downtown and entered Marcus's inlet facing neighborhood. I found a parking spot within a block of the palace, which was nice since we chucked our jackets in the car.

The moment we walked in, Marcus called out, "Joyeux Noel and Aurora Sky!"

He directed us to the kitchen where a young man in a tux offered drinks from a tray. He was as young and fit as the bartender from last weekend.

One of the trays was lined with shot glasses filled with thick, red liquid.

Aurora's eyes widened. "Is that..."

"Blood," I said. "Don't worry, it comes from the blood bank. There's wine in the fridge or champagne if you prefer."

A dark figured slipped into the kitchen behind us. Amusement danced across Fane Donado's face as he focused on Aurora. He wore all black and

had black hair buzzed at the sides with a tuff of blond at the top. Somehow, he managed to pull it off.

"I think Aurora would prefer the blood," he said.

It was a good thing Aurora had her back turned to him. It gave her time to recover from the flash of alarm that crossed over her face. By the time she turned around, she took on an expression of annoyance. She wasn't fooling me, and I'm sure she wasn't fooling Fane. Vampires seemed to have a sixth sense about that sort of thing.

I wasn't about to stick around for the fireworks.

"Have you seen Gavin?" I asked, looking over Aurora's shoulder.

"He's in the living room," Fane said.

"Great. See you around." I left the kitchen without a backwards glance. Aurora seemed to understand that she couldn't be with Fane, so I was sure she wouldn't do anything stupid like hook up with him for one night.

I stopped at the edge of the living room and scanned the vampires and humans dotting the palace in red and black. I spotted Gavin in a chair by the windows. He had his eyes on his phone, which hovered at his midsection.

I maneuvered through the crowd, anticipating the moment Gavin looked up and noticed me, but his head remained bent.

"Hi, Gavin," I said when I'd reached the small space beside him.

Gavin didn't bother looking up from his phone. "Good evening, Noel."

The formality of his tone took me back. I wasn't sure how to respond, so I looked at the source of his interest and asked, "Did you get a new game?"

Gavin frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Just that you've been glued to your phone all week."

Gavin's eyes narrowed. "I'm not playing games."

I leaned back not even sure what to say besides a pouty, "Okay. Didn't mean to interrupt."

Gavin didn't respond; he just kept his head down and began texting again.

It took several seconds for it to register that he actually wasn't going to stop and talk to me. Not only was I utterly confused, but now I felt like a complete idiot on top of everything else standing in front of a guy blatantly ignoring me.

I needed to sit down and regroup, but the closest seat faced Gavin, and there was no way I could be near him after getting the brush-off.

What had changed? What had I done wrong? I didn't have a single theory to comfort me.

I found a seat in the far corner of the living room, facing away from everyone. All I had was my reflection in the window for company, and she had no answers, either. I sat staring at her. She offered no comfort or encouragement of any kind—the perfect companion to fit my hollow mood.

I must have zoned out because I hadn't expected to see Aurora again for at least a couple hours, but it felt more like a couple minutes when her

reflection joined mine in the window.

"Noel?"

Slowly, I looked up.

"Oh, hi."

"What's the matter?" Aurora asked, taking a seat beside me.

Normally I wouldn't discuss Gavin with anyone, but his weird behavior was making me nuts. "I don't know what's going on with Gavin. He's being so cold to me tonight."

Aurora raised a brow. "He's a vampire."

"Ha, ha." That's what I got for sharing my feelings. "What about Fane?" I asked. "Is it true he broke up with Valerie?"

Aurora was so easy to distract. "He says they were only together a day." She slumped forward. "He was rather cold, too."

I felt a twinge of pity. It had been easy for me to place judgment on Aurora for not wanting to break up with Fane and obsessing about him and Valerie after she did. If she felt the way I did about Gavin, I could begin to sympathize.

I sighed. "Why can't we like normal guys?"

"Because we're not normal girls."

We gazed into the blackness beyond our reflections in the window pane.

Aurora cleared her throat. "A boy from school followed me here."

"What?" I said, turning away from the window.

"Well, actually he followed us here after he saw me get into your car at school."

"Why would he do that?" I never realized February was National Stalk Someone Month.

Aurora rolled her eyes. "I guess he likes me. Annoying, right?"

"And stupid," I added. "Did he see anything?"

Aurora scrunched up her nose. "No, I got him out of here right away and told him to never come back."

"Let's just hope he doesn't." And that was hoping a lot from a high school boy who'd already followed Aurora to a party.

"I was very clear," Aurora said. She sighed. "So much for a quiet evening out. Ready to get out of here?"

Was she serious? We'd barely arrived. Then again, maybe it was better if Aurora left before she attracted any more trouble. I stood and led the way out of the living room.

I caught Henry's eye in the kitchen as I passed. I wondered if he knew what was up with Gavin.

I tapped my fingers on the steering wheel as I drove across town. When we reached Aurora's home, she said, "That's weird. All the lights are on."

I vaguely remembered her saying her dad had split. I wish mine had taken off. If he'd left, I wouldn't have had to. Aurora didn't know how lucky she was. Not only that, but obviously her mother was up worrying about her.

Mine couldn't even muster up the guts to protect her own children. I thought that was supposed to be a basic animal instinct. We had the capacity to reason and communicate verbally, but all it had done was corrupt us. All hail the human race. If any creature deserved eternal life, it was dolphins or elephants, not humans. People were a plague on earth.

Aurora stepped out of the car and wished me a good night, but I wasn't calling it a night. My roommates were out for the evening. Even Eric couldn't get away with staying in on Valentine's. Clive would never allow a Hallmark holiday to dictate his dinner plans. He likely assumed that no guy wanted to be with me and could very well be stalking the entrance of my building.

Screw that.

I was going back to the palace. Maybe Gavin had finished texting or whatever the hell he was doing and lightened up. He'd made moves on me before. I hadn't imagined it. Obviously he was interested. He must have been distracted by some important news. He wasn't the most open guy. Probably didn't want to bother me with whatever it was.

I zipped through downtown, only vaguely aware of traffic and street lights.

Finding a parking spot proved challenging, especially later in the evening, but my luck improved when a car pulled away from the curb. I took their spot as soon as they vacated it.

I let myself into the palace. There was a small gathering in the kitchen, but I didn't see any sign of Marcus. I glanced at the last place I'd seen Gavin, but he wasn't there. The living room was packed, the voices within louder than the music. A couple going up the spiral staircase squeezed past a couple coming down.

I hadn't noticed Gavin during my initial scan, so I stepped further inside the living room.

Hopefully he hadn't gone home or upstairs.

A flash of red caught my eye when I looked around the room a third time. Valerie. Red hair, red dress. Big surprise. She was sitting in a guy's lap on the couch. My first thought was that it was Fane and that it was a good thing Aurora had left early. Then Valerie moved back ever so slightly and I saw that it wasn't Fane, but Gavin taking the brunt of her ass. My Gavin.

My fingers curled. My stomach clenched into one tight fist. I tasted bile. I felt rage. And still I couldn't believe it was true.

That heinous bitch!

Apparently I wasn't the only person who felt she'd stepped into an alternate universe. Maxine, a regular female vamp at Marcus's parties, honed in on Valerie as she entered the room from the spiral staircase.

"This is new," Maxine said, tossing her copper highlighted hair over one shoulder. "What happened to Francesco?"

Valerie did her own hair toss, one that sent her tresses over her shoulders —like billowing boob curtains. "Fane is old news. Emphasis on old. Gavin

here is nineteenth century. Barely old at all. Besides, he's so much better to look at."

Gavin beamed with pleasure. He gripped Valerie's hips and said, "You're the most gorgeous thing I've looked at in two centuries."

My heart dropped. All I'd ever gotten out of Gavin was a "You look nice," and he'd never looked at me the way he stared at Valerie, as though he were a thirteen-year-old who'd never seen breasts before.

A gust of bitter wind reached my legs when the front door opened. I turned in time to see Fane flick the butt of his cigarette to the ground before stepping inside. He might have gone unnoticed longer if other guests hadn't seen him and quieted in that way that attracts instant attention.

Fane took languid steps across the stone entrance, stopping at the lip of the living room. He glanced at Valerie. I wish I could have looked as bored as Fane when he noticed his ex-girlfriend in another vamp's lap.

Fane scratched his pale cheek. "Two exes in one night. Marcus really knows how to throw a party."

Valerie sniggered. "Maybe you should have stayed at home drinking tea with Joss."

Fane took another step inside the living room. "There's only one thing I like to drink." His voice was intimate, as though it were just he and Valerie having a private conversation without the rest of us listening in. "Good thing Gavin likes sharing." Fane winked.

Gavin wrapped an arm around Valerie and glared at Fane. "She's off limits."

Something inside me felt broken. Taken. He'd said I was taken. Now I'd been tossed aside and replaced by ginger vamp bait.

Fane looked around the room and chuckled. "Just remember I had her first. But then, you always went for the leftovers, Gavin. I guess that makes you more of a vulture than a vampire."

The people standing around only looked mildly interested in the male bravado on Valerie's behalf.

I was so disgusted I wanted to leave, but it's not like I could retreat mid-act. I so wanted Fane to steal Valerie back, claim his former rights, yank her from Gavin's lap, and haul her skanky ass up the stairs then ravish the banshee until there was nothing left but a pile of red rags. But a Fane and Valerie comeback was about as likely as Marcus suddenly developing an appetite for snatch.

Valerie rose to her feet and glared at Fane. She lifted her nose in the air. "Come on, Gavin. I'll show you how tasty leftovers can be." She shot Fane and me a silky smile.

Gavin shot up after her, not sparing either of us a glance.

"I think I'm going to be sick," I whispered as Valerie sashayed her way up the stairs, Gavin following eagerly at her heels.

I hadn't realized I'd spoken aloud until I heard Fane's voice inside my

ear. “It’s his loss. She tastes like rotten fish.” I hadn’t seen Fane move next to me. My senses had gone numb the moment I saw Gavin with Valerie.

“Rotten fish,” I repeated with a frown. So Valerie’s blood did taste off. That or Fane was still putting on his macho show. I hoped so. Maybe my taste had turned Gavin off. But he’d sucked my blood before. Please tell me I did not taste like rotten fish!

Henry walked in a second later and missed the whole Valerie and Gavin barf show. He took mindful steps as he glided over with a full martini glass, sipping from it only when he’d stopped beside Fane and me .

Henry finished swallowing and looked directly at Fane. “So Aurora was followed

here... again. Not the best track record, Francesco.”

Fane smirked. “You mean that boy from earlier? Mike? The only danger he poses is to himself.”

“He’s still a threat.” Henry took another sip of his martini.

“What do you propose, Henry? We slash him and stash him at the dump?” Fane chuckled softly.

Suddenly I wasn’t breathing. Fane better be joking. They both better be joking. I looked at Henry.

He didn’t look amused, but he didn’t shoot down the idea, either.

“Perhaps if you made it clear that you and Aurora are together guys from the outside wouldn’t try swooping in on her.”

Fane’s jaw clenched when he forced a smile.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Henry said. “I’m only pointing out the obvious. She’s trouble.”

“Yeah, she’s trouble all right.” Fane grumbled under his breath. “But that’s none of your business.” He started for the entryway.

“Where are you going?” Henry asked.

“Home,” Fane replied. He locked eyes with me. “To drink tea.” Fane smirked when he saw Henry’s look of confusion. Then he turned and headed for the front door.

Henry shot me a bemused smile. “Want a sip?”

His martini glass was over half full thanks to the dainty sips he’d taken.

I downed it in five seconds. After coughing softly to clear my searing throat, I handed the empty glass back to Henry. “I suppose there’s more where that came from.”

Henry leaned in. “Or we could take this upstairs.”

“Why not?” I answered with all the numbness I felt inside.

Henry leaned forward, inches from my eyes. “You’re something special, Noel. So brave and beautiful.”

I didn’t have it in me to smile.

I’m not special. I’m not beautiful.

And brave? I simply didn’t give a shit if I lived or died. I didn’t give a shit what happened to me. Maybe that’s why I said what I did next.

"Has anyone ever told you, you talk too much?"

Henry's face darkened right before he let out a bark of laughter. He gave me an appreciative nod. "You're the first."

"Let's get me a refill first. Unless you want to drink alone?"

Henry smiled. "You can have as much as you want."

And more. So much more, but it turned out to be too much.

When I first woke up, I didn't know where I was until several shades of orange came into focus. This was no sunrise staring me in the face. I blinked four times, remembering that I'd darted in front of Henry in the hallway earlier that morning and led him into the unoccupied October room. At least Valerie hadn't taken that away from me. But it was just a room. I didn't give a shit about a room.

My neck ached where Henry had bit me.

I turned my head on the pillow, relieved to find myself alone in bed. Not exactly a shocker. I was good enough to bite, but not to bed.

Henry had, however, taken my shoes off and pulled the covers over me.

The hardwood floor was cold. My mouth tasted like cotton. I stuck my head under the faucet of the October room's private bathroom. Besides having a slight case of bedhead, I looked about the same as when I'd arrived. My makeup wasn't even smudged.

After finger combing my hair, I emerged from the room, pumps in hand, eyeing the doors I passed in the hallway. Several were closed with bats dangling from the doorknobs. I wasn't the only overnight guest.

Was Gavin behind one of the doors?

Part of me wanted him to step into the hall as I walked by. I wanted him to look me in the eye and see the hurt he'd put there.

Maybe I'd misread his signals. Then again, maybe a certain redhead had gotten in the middle and rained hot lava all over my parade.

He'd said he'd turn me if he could. That was practically "I love you" in vampire speak.

The smell of bacon greeted my nose at the top of the staircase. Dull gray light filled the large windows below, reflecting off the inlet. I circled my way down the stairs and headed to the kitchen.

Marcus stood over a frying pan in a pair of black silk pajama pants with a matching buttoned top. A man in a suit sat with a cup of coffee and the newspaper at the small table against the far wall of the kitchen. I'd only met Marcus's partner, Richard, once. Where Marcus was boisterous, Richard was reserved. He sat with perfect posture and a serious gaze.

Marcus looked over his shoulder. "We've got an early bird."

"Sorry," I said. "I don't remember falling asleep."

"You're welcome to stay the night," Richard said, surprising me.

“There’s no reason to put yourself at risk on the road.”

I looked from him to Marcus.

“Richard has a heart of gold,” Marcus said. “He’s a rare find.”

The two men stared at each other for a moment before Richard cleared his throat and buried his head in the newspaper.

“Now! Noel,” Marcus said cheerfully. “What can I get you for breakfast? I’ve got scrambled eggs, fried potatoes, bacon, and homemade scones,” he said, setting down his spatula to clap softly, “in the oven.”

It had been a long time since I’d had a real breakfast, but at that moment my intestines felt like charred toast.

“Thanks, but I’m not hungry.” Okay, so I was hungry, but my stomach couldn’t handle anything, not since twisting in on itself after seeing Gavin with Valerie.

Marcus smiled at me warmly. “Honey, I applaud your figure, but you’re not leaving here without one of my homemade scones.” He ripped a paper towel from a roll on the counter and pulled a scone out of the oven with his bare hand.

“Thank you,” I said, taking it from him.

“Don’t you dare throw that out,” Marcus called after me as I left the kitchen.

He probably thought I was anorexic. I actually had a hearty appetite. I simply didn’t gain weight. Hate me all you want. Tough shit.

I just wasn’t in the mood for a scone. It’s like, “Oh, the guy you have a major jones for just hooked up with the bitch from hell. Here, have a scone.” I felt like chucking the damn thing into the road. But I didn’t.

After wrapping it in the paper towel, I set it on the passenger’s seat to save for later. It was early Saturday morning, and the roads were quiet.

After crossing town, I did a U-turn in the street and grabbed a parking spot beside my building. Morning always felt calmer than night. Safer. Bad things never seemed to happen in the immediate hours after nine a.m.

The washing machines spun their way through rinse cycles as I passed the laundry room.

I took a quick look through the wood slats in the outer hallway. A couple of cars were warming up under the carport and a woman from the first floor was brushing snow off her windshield from an open spot beside the building. Other than that, the coast was clear.

I breathed the cool air in and out as I unlocked my apartment door. I quickly locked it behind me.

It was eerily quiet inside. Michelle had most likely spent the night with her boyfriend. Trudy did morning yoga.

I set Marcus’s scone on the kitchen counter to save for later... maybe even now. I was starting to feel hungry. I’d bypassed all the appetizers at Marcus’s in favor of numbing my emotional pain as quickly as possible. Happy fucking Valentine’s! Always had hated this holiday. Now I hated it

even more. It was a slap in the face to anyone who had no one to love them.

I stepped out of my pumps, scooped them up, and was walking barefoot across the carpet toward my room when I saw a figure in the living room from the corner of my eye. My heart jumped instantly into my throat and began hammering out of control.

Clive sat on the couch, smiling smugly.

"Hello, Noel."

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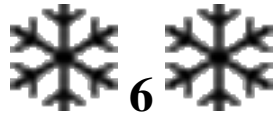

6
Out of Town

I dropped one shoe and clutched the other against my stomach. “How did you get in here?”

“Your roommate let me in on her way to yoga.” Clive smirked. “Nine a.m. Saturdays, right?”

“You can’t be here.”

“Of course I can. I’m your father.”

“You can’t be here,” I repeated, and this time I saw a flash of anger cross over his eyes.

He leaned forward like he might stand up. I squeezed the pump in my hand as though gripping the handle of a knife. I’m sure the heel could do some damage—especially when aimed at an eye. A cold sweat broke out over my body. If Clive came at me I was more likely to freeze up than take out his eye. I was equipped to kill vampires, not monsters.

Clive’s eyes dropped down to the death grip I had on my shoe. He relaxed back into the couch.

“All our neighbors have been asking about you. Your grandparents want to know when you’re coming home.”

“Where did you tell them I was?” Clive lied like a champ. He could come up with something on the spot. I wanted to know what story he’d sold the public.

“Rehab,” Clive said, shaking his head sadly. He looked me over from head to foot. “I see it’s not working. You need to come home where your family can take care of you.”

Bile rose to my throat.

Take care of me? Is that what he called taunting and bullying and beating down his own daughter until she couldn’t take it anymore? All my life I’d felt like he was trying to push me over the edge. But why put a stop to the games? What he really wanted was to push me over then pull me back up so he could push me again and again and again and again.

My jaw ached from the pressure of my grinding teeth. “I can take care of myself. And I don’t ever want to see your face again.”

I braced myself for his reaction. With Clive I never knew whether he’d erupt or come off as calm as a priest on Sunday. He took the high ground on this one, looking me square in the eye when he said, “Well, that’s just too bad. I’m your father.”

He loved saying that, like he was Darth Vader delivering terrible news over and over—news that could destroy me.

I’d nearly let him destroy me once. I wouldn’t let him again. Melcher said the world needed me. Melcher wasn’t a liar. Not like my dad. He had one

of the most important jobs on the whole planet, and so did I.

I lifted my chin. “You need to leave now, unless you’d rather be escorted out.” I grabbed my phone.

“Who do you think you’re going to call, Noel?” Clive asked in a snide voice.

“A friend,” I replied. Little did my father know I had them in high places. Agent Melcher didn’t want family interfering in my new life.

Clive stood up.

“All you had to do is ask nicely,” he said.

Yeah, right. The man lied as easily as he breathed.

“Please leave,” I said.

Clive stopped three feet from me. “I will... for now, but you need to come home. I’m giving you one week, Noel.”

“No.”

Clive smiled because my “no” was barely a breath. Now that he was closer, I could smell his familiar off-putting scent—eau de demonic.

Clive zeroed in on my neck. I hadn’t had a chance to cover the bite mark. Instantly, his eyes lit up and a smile cut through his cheeks. Clive took sick pleasure from pain in any form.

“Did your friend do this to you?”

“That’s none of your business,” I retorted, standing my ground no matter how much I felt like stepping away from him.

“You need your family more than ever, Noel. I’ll let your mom and brother know you’re coming home. You wouldn’t want to let your little brother down, would you? Make him think you don’t want to see him. I’m sure there’s a heart somewhere inside there. Do the right thing for once in your life, Noel.” Clive stepped around me in one fluid movement and headed to the door. He unlocked the deadbolt and let himself out.

There was a scream building inside my throat, ready to erupt and echo through the halls of the building.

I rushed to the front door and relocked the bolt then stormed back inside the living room and threw my pump at the spot where Clive had been seated. It missed the couch, banging the wall instead, before dropping onto the cushions. But not before leaving a black mark on the eggshell paint.

I stormed into the kitchen and looked out the window in time to see Clive walking down the dirt road sandwiched between our building and a warehouse. So that’s how I’d missed his car—he’d parked out of sight. Because that wasn’t creepy.

Turning my back to the window, I surveyed the apartment through the open space between the kitchen and living room. It no longer felt secure. Not only had Clive found me, he’d managed to get inside.

I couldn’t stay here. There was just no way. But where was I supposed to go on such short notice? Whitney and Hope came from families only slightly less screwed up than mine. Their parents would never allow me to crash

anyway, not even for a night.

There was Aurora, but I didn't exactly feel comfortable asking her. I could tell her mom thought I was trouble the one time I'd come over. And then I'd have to answer all kinds of questions I'd rather not share the answers to.

My life was personal. Private.

I had a week to figure something out, because no way in hell would I be sticking around this place at the end of it.

Just what I needed. First the school transfer—thanks to Valerie. Then Gavin. Compliments of Valerie, yet again. Then the reappearance of Clive. And now I needed to move out of my apartment and go who knows where.

I yanked open the knife drawer and stared down.

I felt like cutting open my chest and ripping out my heart. I felt like holding the lifeless organ up to my dad and Gavin and saying, "You can't hurt me anymore, because now I'm as heartless as the two of you."

I grabbed a pair of kitchen scissors and stormed into the bathroom. Lights on, standing in front of the mirror, I gathered my hair in my fist and began cutting through the strands.

The snipping sounds made my heart pump with elation. I hacked my way through the rest of my hair and set the long black rope of it onto the bathroom counter. Well, that was freeing. I felt lighter already. Maybe I could cut off my head while I was at it. Forget my heart. My brain was the real problem. It's where thoughts festered and turned into unwanted emotions. Off with it!

Scissors opened wide, I held one blade to my throat and stared into my reflection. My hair hung jagged around my shoulders.

The scissors made one last slicing sound as I snapped them shut and set them down.

I had no desire to be dead. Not anymore. I was made of stronger stuff than that.

At ten, I started calling hair saloons until I found one that could see me that morning. I covered Henry's bite mark with concealer and a studded choker, got my hair trimmed, and spent the afternoon in a coffee shop with my laptop looking at roommate-wanted ads.

I'd love to rent a place of my own. No roommates. No drama. Nothing but peace and quiet, or loud music if I wanted. Who knew? Maybe Melcher would go for it if I took the initiative and found something without his help.

One way or another, I had to find a place to crash within a week.

I showed up for school Monday with no intention of going to class. West's library was newer and more open than Denali's, which made it harder to hide in, but as long as you kept your face in a book most school librarians were happy to leave you alone.

For a few brief months, I thought my dad was out of my life for good. I should have known that a city of three hundred thousand wasn't nearly enough to hide in. Anchorage trapped its inhabitants between Cook Inlet and the Chugach Mountains. It was like living inside a snow globe.

For one brief week, Gavin made me feel happy. Really happy, not fake-happy. I mean, when I really thought about it, I wasn't a happy person. My undercover work for the government gave me job satisfaction. That was something. Marcus's parties were fun. I had a roof over my head and food in the cupboard. But what did any of that matter if nobody loved me?

When I'd told Fane Aurora was in trouble, he'd dropped everything to come to her rescue. And that was after I told him she was a vampire hunter.

Who would come running if I was ever abducted?

I sunk further into my chair.

I lost track of the number of bells that rang. My stomach rumbled. I ignored it. At some point someone came over, and I tensed, thinking the librarian was about to point out my overextended stay, but it was Aurora with her long black hair hanging over her shoulders as she leaned beside me. Relief and annoyance filled me. I wasn't really in the mood for conversation.

"I love your hair," Aurora said.

"Thanks."

"What are you doing in the library? Get hit by nostalgia?" she asked.

I breathed in and out, not responding.

Aurora frowned. "What's the matter?"

I might as well tell her. "It's Valerie." I scratched at a rough patch of wood on the table with my black painted fingernail.

Aurora slipped into a seat beside me. "What's she done now?"

"She hooked up with Gavin."

Aurora straightened up. "What? When?"

"After I dropped you off Friday night I went back to the party and found Valerie in Gavin's lap... and then they went upstairs." I dropped my head into my arms.

"I'm so sorry, Noel." Aurora touched my back gently. "Um, want to get out of here? Grab a sandwich?"

"I'm not hungry," I said through my arms. I lifted my head. "But I'll come with you. I just want to get out of here." I shoved my things into my backpack. I felt like shoving myself inside and being left alone.

As we headed down the hall, the intercom system crackled to life.

"Aurora Sky and Noel Harper, please report to the front office immediately."

I looked at Aurora. Now what? Whatever. I needed a distraction. We made our way down the hallway, all but empty at lunch hour, and rounded the last corner before we hit the school office. I marched over to the secretary and said, "I'm Noel Harper, and this is Aurora Sky."

The woman looked around her desk. She handed Aurora and I each a slip

of paper. We unfolded them together.

I need you on base now. – Melcher

"Duty calls," I said sarcastically. Again. "Do you need anything out of your locker?" I asked Aurora. Since getting into a head-on collision, she was too afraid to drive, which made me the default driver. I didn't mind driving. It made me feel less short, and I liked being in control.

While Aurora went to her locker, I got the car started and pulled into the pick-up lane. Melcher better not have called Valerie in. I tapped my fingers on the steering wheel. My vision blurred.

A couple minutes later, Aurora tossed her backpack inside and hopped in. We didn't talk much on the way to the base. I wasn't in a talking mood and Aurora wasn't exactly Miss Chatty Chatterson.

Valerie was the last person I felt like seeing, so low and behold, who walked in after Dante, Aurora, and I got to base—the bitch herself. I thought she'd zero in on me, but she chose to direct her attention on Aurora. Guess she saw Aurora as competition, whereas I was a loser not worth worrying about.

"Don't tell me I've been called in to babysit Aurora again."

Dante smirked at Valerie and said, "Good thing you came. A call girl's gone missing, and Melcher needs you to work through her clients until you find the culprit."

My mood was so dark I couldn't even crack a smile.

The smug smile on Valerie's lips turned into a death glare. Melcher walked in, followed by a man in his late twenties. Although he was trim and cleanly shaven, there was something foreboding in his stance and the chilly way he looked around the room. The man took his place behind everyone while Melcher walked around his desk.

"Team, I have bad news. Agent Crist was found dead over the weekend."

The room went silent.

Melcher's seat creaked beneath his wiry figure. "One of our own... gone."

"Did a vamp get her?" Dante asked, voicing my own question.

Melcher nodded slowly. "I'm afraid so. From what the autopsy report showed it appears that this was a rush job. We believe Crist was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Kind of like Valerie at Marcus's.

I clenched my teeth. I shouldn't be thinking like that. This was bad news. Vamps had already gotten another informant a couple weeks ago, but an agent? How the hell did that happen? These killings were hitting way too close to home.

"Any leads on the culprit?" Dante asked.

Melcher nodded toward the back. "That's what Jared's here to help us

with."

"Agent?" Dante asked.

The man relaxed his arms and quirked one brow in a way that reminded me of a villainous cartoon. "Just Jared," he replied smugly.

Melcher cleared his throat. "Jared is our top recruiter. He's taking out time to help us find Agent Crist's killer."

"Where do we start?" Dante asked.

"We found another body beside Crist's," Melcher said. "We believe the second body will lead us to the culprit."

"Who was it?" Dante asked.

Melcher looked directly at Aurora. "It was a boy named Michael Peterson. He went to West High School. Did you know this boy?"

Holy shit! Mike, the boy who followed us to the palace?

The color drained from Aurora's face. She stared back at Melcher, speechless.

I leaned forward in my seat. "He followed us to Marcus's party Friday night. The moment Aurora noticed him, she escorted the boy back to his car. That's the last we saw of him."

"Marcus," the Jared guy repeated eagerly behind me.

Melcher's lips puckered when he frowned. "Marcus doesn't like to get his clothes wrinkled, let alone his hands bloody."

"He's not the only one," Jared said.

Melcher looked across his desk at me. "Who else was at this party?" He pulled out a notepad and clicked his pen.

Gavin's name was the first to pop in my head. Suddenly my throat felt dry. My brain kept going blank other than seeing Gavin's eyes when they'd looked at me warmly. His smile when we'd joked together. I needed to think of other names—to remember who was there. Anyone but Gavin. Even after he'd abandoned me, I felt an insane urge to protect him.

"Um, obviously, Marcus was there," I said to buy myself more time. I glanced sideways. Aurora, Dante, and Valerie were all staring at me—Aurora and Valerie the most intensely.

"Thomas, Gretchen, Maxine, Roger, Buck, Cole, Stewart, Andre, a couple waiters," I said, finally regaining my visual memory. I rattled off more names as they came to me, leaving out Fane and Henry, though I still bore Henry's bite marks. If Melcher asked I'd answer truthfully, but omission wasn't lying.

My stomach twisted uncomfortably when I remembered Henry calling Mike trouble and Fane's half-hearted attempt at humor when he suggested they kill then dispose of the body at the dump.

"Where did you find the bodies?" I asked.

Melcher tapped his desk once. "At the landfill."

I forced myself not to look at Aurora. That's where Henry, Gavin, and Fane had disposed of the vamps who'd abducted her.

Fane left the party early on Friday. And who knows when Henry left. I'd passed out pretty quickly and woken up alone.

Melcher sat up in his chair. "I need all of you to wait out in the hall while Jared and I talk. We'll call you back to deliver your instructions, so don't go far."

As soon as we were clear of Melcher's office, I whispered to Aurora, "I had no choice."

"I know," she said.

Before we could say anything more, Dante slipped in between us.

"Poor Agent Crist, who would have dreamed?"

Aurora nodded. "It's horrific. And Mike."

Dante slipped an arm around Aurora and me. "What's with this party I wasn't invited to?"

"You wouldn't last five minutes with Marcus," I said.

Marcus would eat him up all right—young, handsome, well-built boy like Dante. He'd probably find his humor a turn on, too.

Dante chuckled. "So he's a biter, is he?"

Aurora rolled her eyes. "Only when it comes to hot younger man."

Clearly we were thinking the same thing.

"You just admitted you think I'm hot," Dante said to Aurora.

I ducked out from under his arm. I wasn't sticking around while they played footsie in the hall, especially not with Valerie headed in our direction.

"I can't believe you two, flirting when Agent Crist's killer is on the loose."

Valerie's presence was my cue to leave

I ducked around the corner, but not for long. The moment I heard the secretary's phone ring in the hallway, I returned and followed everyone back inside Melcher's office.

"All right everyone, let's get down to business," Melcher said before I'd taken a seat.

The new guy sat on the edge of Crist's desk, looking slightly less bored now that it was assignment time.

"Two of the guests were from out of town. We'll start with them. Andre Morrel lives in Sitka and Buck Jenner is in Fairbanks."

Andre Morrel didn't strike me as the killing type. I'd only seen him at the palace twice, but he hadn't taken anyone upstairs either time. The man looked more socially starved than blood thirsty.

And laid back, cool dude, Buck Jenner? The idea of him attacking and murdering two people was laughable.

Jared pushed away from Crist's desk, looming over us. "Listen up, rookies. We're splitting into two teams."

Please don't put me with Valerie. Please don't put me with Valerie. I'll kill the bitch if you pair us together.

My jaw clenched.

Jared glanced at Valerie and Aurora. “Ginger and Raven, you’re with me.”

Thank God!

“You two,” Jared said, looking from Dante to me. “Moose and Mouse. You’re a team.”

Mouse? Seriously? My disgust most likely mirrored everyone else’s.

Jared grabbed a coin off Crist’s desk. “We’ll flip to see who goes where.” He looked at Dante. “Heads you go north. Tails, south.”

Dante shrugged. “Sure, whatever.”

Jared flicked the coin at the ceiling, snatching it mid-air, and smacking it over his arm. “Heads,” he announced.

All I knew was that Fairbanks was three hundred and sixty miles away from Clive and that sounded fine to me. Maybe I wouldn’t come back. Melcher had lost an informant in Fairbanks. I could take her place. Fairbanks was a great place for a lonely and unloved girl. I could walk around town all day with my frozen heart.

“I’ll have three seats booked on Alaska Airlines leaving tomorrow,” Melcher said addressing Jared, Aurora, and Valerie.

“What about school?” Aurora demanded.

“Sorry, Aurora.” Melcher said, sounding anything but. “This takes precedence.”

Aurora stormed out. Valerie got up and stretched before heading for the door.

“Guess I’ve got some packing to do for the big trip,” she said.

Dante started out after Valerie.

“Dante, we need to talk to you and Noel next,” Melcher called after him.

“I’ll be right back,” Dante said.

Probably chasing after Aurora. For some reason guys got the urge to be superheroes whenever she was distressed or in trouble. Then there was me, left to fend for myself. My card had been dealt.

Dante wasn’t gone long. “Give me the word, boss,” Dante said, smiling as he walked back into Melcher’s office. “Do you want this guy interrogated?”

I snorted. Being free of Valerie did wonders for my psyche. “Buck Jenner didn’t do it. The guy likes beer better than blood. He’s relatively new. Still thinks he’s normal,” I said.

This time Dante snorted. “No one who lives in Fairbanks is normal. Take it from a guy who grew up there.” He grinned.

“Nevertheless, I want you two to check him out,” Melcher said. “No engaging. Follow, observe, and report back to me.”

“Got it,” Dante said. “When do we leave?”

Melcher leaned forward on his desk. “You’re driving, so anytime.”

Jared shot us a dismissive glance.

I got up out of my chair and walked into the hallway ahead of Dante. As soon as he’d walked out, Jared shut the door. The guy reminded me of the

instructors I'd had at boot camp. Absolutely zero character or emotion.

Aurora wasn't a big Melcher fan, but at least there was something human about him under the surface. Guys like Jared had even less humanity in them than vampires.

"So, what do you say, Noel? Want to leave now?"

I glanced sideways at Dante. He obviously didn't expect me to agree.

"I'm ready if you're ready."

"Really?"

I was ready yesterday. It wasn't like Clive would take time off work to follow me to Fairbanks. And good luck trying to stalk me when I wasn't in town.

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7
Moose and Mouse

I drove home, threw some things in a bag, and headed for Dante's place. When I knocked on the door, a dog barked.

"You weren't kidding about being ready to split," Dante said as he let me in.

I shrugged. "I travel light."

A great big golden retriever tried to ram his head between my legs. I grabbed him under the jaw and patted him firmly on the head, pulling it away from my crotch.

"That's Tommy," Dante said, retreating via the living room. "Come on in. I have a few more things to throw into my bag." Dante disappeared down a hallway.

I walked into the living room, keeping my back to Tommy, who followed close behind. A jumbo flat screen took up one wall. There were three remotes on the coffee table across from it, a bowl half-filled with pretzels, and stack of Sports Illustrated magazines.

Dante returned carrying a duffel bag, which he dumped on the couch. The bag gaped open. At the top was a handgun, knife, and roll of duct tape.

I rolled my eyes. "You won't need any of that. Buck wouldn't hurt a fly."

"So, you know this guy really well?"

"Not really."

Dante raised a brow.

"Fine," I said. "Bring your weapons if they make you feel better."

Dante grinned. "They always make me feel better." He turned to his bag and zipped it up. "What time is it?"

Did I look like the kind of girl who wore a wristwatch? When I didn't answer, Dante looked over at a mantle against the opposite wall. "Two thirteen. The day is young." He hoisted his bag over his shoulder. "Come on, Tommy."

The golden retriever wagged his tail.

"Wait a minute," I said. "The dog's coming with us?"

Dante continued toward the door. "Yeah, my roommate's working on the slope this week. Can't leave the dude alone all day. Anyway, he's a great lookout dog. Aren't you, Tommy?" Dante's bag dropped to the floor when he stopped to scratch the dog behind the ears. "What do you say when you sense a vampire nearby?" Dante stared into Tommy's eyes. The dog stared back, went still, then suddenly let out one shrill bark. "Good boy, Tommy," Dante said, ruffling the fur on his head. Tommy's tail swished from side to side.

"Okay."

"That's not all." Dante crouched beside the dog. "Tommy, what do you

say when a hot chick walks by?" Dante grinned and winked. Tommy howled in response. Dante gave him more pats, laughing all the while. He straightened up, smiling proudly. "He's such a hound dog."

"Just so long as he doesn't do any howling at night," I said.

"Depends if a hot chick walks by."

Did that mean I should be offended when I walked past both Dante and his dog without hearing so much as a "woof"?

Once I'd gotten my pack out of my car and chucked it into Dante's Jeep, we were on our way north.

"I've actually never been to Fairbanks," I said.

Dante glanced at me as he headed toward the Chugiak Mountains. "Never been to Fairbanks... how is that possible?"

"What reason would I have to go?"

"What reason would you have not to?" Dante countered.

He sped down Tudor, passing business areas followed by subdivisions. We curved left, following the final stretch before hitting the Glen Highway.

"I need fuel," Dante said.

Five seconds later, he cranked the wheel and took an abrupt turn into a Taco Bell parking lot, roaring up to the drive -through electronic board. Not the kind of fuel I'd thought he meant.

"Welcome to Taco Bell. May I take your order?"

Dante poked his head out of the window. "Yeah, I'll have a seven layer burrito, a churro, and a medium Mountain Dew."

"Will that be all?"

Dante glanced at me. "Do you eat?"

Rather than answer him, I leaned over the console and projected my voice out the window. "I'll take two double decker tacos, a nacho supreme, and twenty-ounce Mountain Dew freeze."

Dante's face lit up with his grin. "Finally, a chick who understands the concept of road food."

When I tried to hand him cash at the first window Dante waved my hand away.

"Save it. My treat."

Wow, I'd never had a guy buy me a meal. But this wasn't a date. Still, it was a nice gesture. Dante pulled up to the second window where a girl barely older than me handed over our drinks. Dante passed over my frozen Mountain Dew, followed by a paper bag.

"They get it all?" he asked as he pulled out of the drive-through and put on his blinker.

I dug through the sack real quick. "Burrito, churro, tacos, nachos. Yep."

"Mind handing me the churro?"

"No problem."

The wrapping crinkled as the churro passed from my hand to Dante's. The nachos crunched in my mouth when I chewed. I handed Dante his burrito

once he finished dessert. He drove with his knees, holding the burrito in one hand while flipping through radio stations with his other until he landed on a top hits station.

We finished our food quickly. Dante tossed the end of his burrito over the seat to his dog, who chewed twice before swallowing the piece whole.

I began sucking down my frosty soda. As we passed under the bridge that took traffic over to Elmendorf Air Force Base, Dante saluted in the direction of the gate.

I laughed. I don't know why. Maybe the caffeine had gone to my head.

"Ready for your first adventure to Fairbanks, Minnie?" Dante asked.

"Whatever you say, Bullwinkle."

Dante chuckled. "Good one. What's your last name again?"

"Harper."

"You've got spirit, Harper, and that's important in our line of work. We gotta stay sharp at all times even when we draw unlucky numbers or get the wrong side of the coin. I'm afraid we're not gonna see a whole lotta action this trip."

Tailing Buck? No kidding.

"Then again this Buck vamp might slip up, and when he does, we'll be there to take him down," Dante said.

I nearly snorted Mountain Dew out my nose. "Have you ever met any normal vampires, or does Melcher only send you after the coldhearted killers and village crazies?"

Dante grinned. "Those are my favorite kinds. Normal vampire... what's the point?"

My fingers slowly went numb holding onto my drink. I set it in a cup holder.

Dante had a way of slurping his drink through the straw that sounded like he'd reached the end of the cup even though it was still over half full.

I slurped in response, and he slurped louder. I had to stop when I laughed, forgetting for two glorious seconds that my life had turned to shit. No, not turned to shit. It had always been shit, but whereas it had been crazy, bad shit before, it had become slightly less shitty, and right back to the land of insanity.

"So," Dante said, drumming his palms on the steering wheel. "I know Fairbanks. You know Buck. Together we can have this thing wrapped up in twenty-four hours, don't you think?"

"I think it will take more than a day to observe him."

"This guy ever bite you?"

"No."

"Hmm."

"What?" I asked.

Dante stopped tapping his wheel and turned his head to me. "Nothing. Any other names on the Fairbanks watch list?"

"I don't have a watch list for Fairbanks."

"So Melcher only has you keeping tabs on Anchorage's undead?"

I stuffed the empty nacho tray into the paper sack and stretched back into my seat. "Are you fishing for info?"

"Just making conversation. We've got a long drive ahead of us."

"Maybe I'd rather listen to music."

Dante turned the music off and shot me a devious grin.

"Maybe I'd rather listen to my own thoughts," I said.

Dante turned the music back on. "Why not do all three at once? Good teamwork involves communication. I'm not going all the way up to Fairbanks without taking out at least one bad guy, and if you don't know of any maybe this Buck character will lead us to some."

I shook my head.

"Not up for it?" Dante asked.

I stuck out my chin. "I'm up for anything Melcher instructs me to do."

"Perfect! Melcher wants us to rid the world of the demonic plague. That includes Buck."

I pressed my fists into my thighs. "We can't go around killing all vampires. That would be like genocide. A lot of them are nice."

Dante snorted. "A nice vampire. That'll be the day."

"How many vampires have you met?" I demanded.

Dante began driving with his knees again so he could count on his fingers. "Let's see. There was my first initiation kill. Bullet to the head." He looked sideways at me and grinned. "My first training kill. Knife. My first mission kill. That one also got the knife. My second mission kill. Had to run that one over when he tried to flee. My first interrogation... wait that one was human. My first mission to the backcountry." Dante leaned toward me. "Harpoon."

He shrugged when he caught me staring at him. "That's the way you do things in the village."

"I asked how many vampires you'd met, not killed!"

Dante's face wrinkled in confusion. "It's the same thing."

"Never mind."

"It must be difficult getting close to your targets without being allowed to kill them," Dante said. "I couldn't be an informant."

"I like being an informant," I retorted.

Dante grinned. "Do you like being bitten?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure." I glared at Dante before turning away. Someone ought to watch the road since he clearly wasn't.

"Cause I mean, no judgments if you do. I like being bitten."

I choke-snorted. "You would." I couldn't help glancing at Dante. Yep, he was smiling.

"I like knowing my blood is the last thing they taste before they die under my blade."

My lips curled back. "That's sick."

"Yet beautiful at the same time. These creatures go sucking the life out of innocents and then one day they meet me. The curse is broken. Poetic justice."

"I'm with you on the ones who deserve it," I said. "But vampires are like humans. Some kill, some don't."

"But they all drink blood," Dante said as though proving a point.

"They don't have to kill to drink blood."

"But they have to bite."

"They don't even have to bite."

"Then what's the point?" Dante took in my expression and began laughing. "You look so serious right now. I'm just toying with you, Minnie Mouse."

"Sure you are," I grumbled under my breath.

After a minute of silence, Dante asked, "You and Aurora are friends, right?"

"Yeah."

"She ever talk about me?"

Was he serious?

"No."

Dante's grin widened. "Can't break the bonds of secrecy. I get it."

This time, Dante missed my eye role. He'd refocused on the road.

Boy was he barking up the wrong tree. He'd kill Fane in a heartbeat if he knew Aurora had dated a vampire. Moments earlier, he'd admitted to killing vampires for the sole sake of being undead. Fane would be a consolation prize.

My loyalties should have been with Dante, but they landed much closer to Fane.

Dante seemed unreliable, unpredictable, and way too full of himself. Not to mention he had a dog.

He also turned out to be gabbier than a girl. Six hours was a long time to be trapped with someone who wouldn't shut up. I already had Dante's kill tally, but he went back and filled me in on all the details. He had a million questions about my undercover work. And as we approached Mount McKinley, he wanted to know what kind of accident had led me to Melcher and my current role as an undercover informant.

"None of your business," I said.

Dante leaned over the steering wheel as though he was resting against a seatback. "Oh, come on. I told you my story."

Yeah, an exciting ski adventure that involved a helicopter to the top of a mountain, a snowboard, and a nosedive over a cliff. Nowhere near as personal as slitting my wrists. Maybe I ought to make up my own wild story.

"It's... embarrassing," I said slowly.

Dante's cheeks lifted with his grin. "Now I really have to know."

"Okay," I said, stretching in my seat. "I was out with this guy—let's call him Jeff—driving up and down Minnesota on a Friday night, racing a car here and there, but mostly cruising. Anyway, after a while I got bored, so I reached over and unzipped his pants."

I flashed Dante an angelic smile when he cranked his head a hundred and eighty degrees in my direction.

"And then?" he prodded.

"And then what do you think? I sucked his dick." I sat up straighter in the chair, smiling smugly after catching Dante's devious grin.

"Bad girl," Dante said. "What happened next?"

"He ran into a light pole. Bam!"

Dante shook his head. "Men always have been hopeless when it comes to multitasking. Did Jeff survive?"

"Jeff was fine."

"But not you."

"I barely made it."

"The agents stepped in?"

I nodded. "Melcher saved me."

Dante wrapped his fingers around the steering wheel and pulled himself forward. For a moment it looked like he was doing pushups. "Wouldn't have been a bad way for Jeff to go, but not really fair to you."

"I made out okay in the end."

"Damn straight," Dante said, smacking the steering wheel. "Now you're one of the elite. Sorry, the transfusion didn't work out, though. But, hey, at least you have an opportunity to feed information to the hunters. You are still an instrumental part of this organization."

"I know." I didn't need Dante to tell me my role in the policing and extermination of murderous vampires was important.

"So, you and Aurora have the car thing in common?"

"What?"

Dante tilted his head.

Oh, right. The story I just made up. "Yeah, I guess so."

"But you're not afraid of cars," Dante said.

I smiled. "I'm not afraid of cock, either."

It took several seconds for that to register then suddenly Dante was laughing so hard I was afraid for a moment he might run us off the road. Good thing there weren't any light poles in the stretch of wilderness between Anchorage and Fairbanks.

Dante's entire body shook. "Oh, that's good," he said when he had enough air to speak. "Aurora should spend more time around you."

Aurora. Aurora. Aurora. Yeah, I loved my girl and would put my own life on the line any day of the week to protect hers, but the way guys fawned

over her—even followed and got themselves killed for her—you'd think she had beer-flavored nipples. And that was the other thing. She probably couldn't say the word "nipples" or "cock" without turning three shades of red. Guess guys liked the whole unspoiled innocence thing.

Even after having sex with a douche bag jock at Denali High, Aurora acted like a virgin. That girl needed to get laid, like really laid. If Dante thought he'd be the one to do the honors, he had another thing coming. It didn't take a genius to see she wasn't swooning over Dante's obvious attempts to hook up.

Aurora had been bitten by the vampire bug. It was like sex in a messed up way—made a girl feel connected and close to the guy who'd fucked her, or in this case, sucked. It united us to an entire race of creatures who broke through our skin and consumed a small part of us.

I understood it all too well.

After that, men—human men—paled in comparison. We'd been marked for life. I wondered if female vamps would appeal to Dante the way male vamps appealed to me and Aurora.

I could introduce Dante to Maxine, but then he'd kill her so never mind.

"So you've never met a female vamp?" I asked Dante.

"Nope. Have you?"

"Of course."

"What are they like?"

"Some of them are divas, but I've never met one who's dangerous."

Dante squared his shoulders. "They're still blood suckers."

"Yes, they suck blood."

Dante's lips twisted into a smile right before he asked, "Has a vamp chick ever sucked your blood?"

"A few times."

Dante whistled. "You get around."

"It's my job."

Dante lifted his hands off the steering wheel. "Hey, I'm not judging. I'm impressed. I thought Melcher would use Red for that sort of thing."

"Valerie." I scowled.

Dante nodded. "Aurora's not fond of her either. Hey, can't love all your coworkers."

Love? I shook my head. "Melcher prefers Valerie in close relationships."

Dante's lips curled back. "I'd rather get bit by a hundred different vampires than be in a relationship with one of those things."

"Things?" I said, not masking the annoyance in my voice. "They're people, too, and a lot nicer than the average jerk who lives and dies. And you'd be one of those "things" if you were suddenly denied the government's anti-vamp formula."

Dante leaned toward me. "Touchy. Getting a little too close to your targets?"

I huffed and pushed my back into my seat. “They’re not all targets. Talk to Melcher.”

“Oh, I’ve talked to Melcher,” Dante said, suddenly sounding serious. “And he made it very clear he wants them all dead. He’s just more methodical about it than I’d be. He wants to start with the worst ones first and work his way down the list.”

A bark startled me. I’d completely forgotten about the big hairy animal in back.

“Tommy needs to take a leak,” Dante announced. He steered the Jeep off the road at the next pull off. “Come on, boy, let’s make yellow snow.”

Dry frigid air filled the car when Dante opened his door. Outside jagged peaks pierced the shadowy sky.

There wasn’t a single street light or sign of civilization as far as the eye could see. It was unsettling and peaceful at the same time. Made me feel safe, out of reach.

Dante kept the Jeep running while he went out with his dog, walking out of sight behind the car. The door behind me opened a few minutes later, and the dog leaped inside, panted a bit, and settled himself across all three seats in back. Dante jumped into the driver’s seat and said, “Ready to roll?”

“Wait. I have to pee.”

Dante dug a napkin out of the fast food bag and handed it to me. “You might want to put on some pants before you go out there.”

I wrapped my fingers around the paper napkin. “I don’t wear pants.”

Dante looked at me dubiously. “Take it from me, frostbite’s no fun.”

“I don’t get cold.” I nodded at his chest. “What about you? You went out in a T-shirt.”

“Yeah, well, I grew up in these parts.”

“Well, I’m half Russian.” Not to mention numb inside.

“So, pee already.”

“Stop distracting me.”

“Want me to hold your hand?”

We stared each other down. I was the first to break, erupting into giggles that turned into full-fledged laughter. My shoulders shook. Dante got caught in the hilarity, and when I saw tears leaking in the corners of his eyes, it made me laugh harder.

I squeezed my legs together. “I’m going to pee if I keep laughing.”

“If you pee in the Jeep you’re walking the rest of the way to Fairbanks.”

That made me start laughing again. Dante, too.

“I may be laughing, but I mean it,” he said.

“Okay, be right back.” I unclicked my seatbelt, opened the passenger door, and jumped down to the compact snow below. “No looking,” I said before shutting the door.

The cold pricked my bare skin like a thousand frozen splinters. Of course I could feel it, but it didn’t chill me at my core. Cold didn’t bother me. It had

its own unique feeling against my skin, just like cotton, silk, or wool.

I didn't get how people lived in hot places. All that heat would make me want to nap all the time. In the cold, everything was crisp and clear. I felt alive.

I quickly did my thing and hoisted myself back in the Jeep. Dante sped off into the waning light. The mountains turned to shadows in the distance, everything in front of us dimming as though we were chasing the dark.

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8
Into the Dark

Fairbanks was covered in ice fog when we rolled in after eight p.m.

"Welcome to the second largest city in Alaska," Dante said. "She's a beauty, ain't she?"

"I can't see a thing."

Dante took a deep breath and wistfully said, "Ah, home."

"Do you have family here?"

"Oh, yeah."

"Do you ever visit them?"

"Not when I'm on a mission." Dante leaned closer to me. "Don't mix business and family, but I am coming back in a couple weeks for spring break."

"This is where you spend spring break?"

I could see only ten feet in front of me. The yellow dotted lines were the only indication we were still on the road. Good thing the ground wasn't covered in snow or we wouldn't be able to tell up from down.

Dante lifted his chin. "Welcome to the real Alaska. We aren't like you city folks. We're true survivors up here in the north with nothing but our wits to keep us going."

I squinted through the fog at a one-story building lit up within. "Is that a Wal-Mart?"

"Yeah."

I snorted. "How authentically Alaskan of you to have a Wal-Mart right down the road."

Dante shrugged. "Where else are we going to get our duct tape and ammo?"

"I suppose you have an Olive Garden, too."

"Nope. Not that."

Well, that definitely made all the difference.

"What's old Bucky boy's address again?" Dante asked.

"Twenty-one-oh-nine, off Duck Pond Lane." I wasn't familiar with Fairbanks, but I'd Googled the address. "You know it?"

"Duck Pond Lane? Of course."

"He might be working at the A&P, though."

"He's undead, and he's working a day job?"

I smiled sweetly. "How else is he going to pay for his beer?"

"Right. At least he's got his priorities straight."

Dante drove by Buck's cabin first. Even from seventy feet away, we could see the lights were out and no vehicle parked outside. The places on Duck Pond Lane were spaced out by at least an acre, and there wasn't any

kind of sidewalk or curb to park along. Just one dark, dirt road.

"This is going to be a problem later," I said.

"No problem," Dante said. "I've got night vision goggles in the trunk."

I scrunched up my nose. "You mean like spy on him from outside?" I was so not an outdoors girl.

"It's not like we can pull into his driveway and watch him."

Dante turned the Jeep around and headed for the A&P. Two lanes of gas pumps took up the spots directly in front of the convenience store's glass windows. The parking spots on the side of the building faced a brick wall with no view inside, so Dante pulled into a spot across the street along the curb.

Dante drummed his fingers lightly on the steering wheel, staring at the A&P. "I'm hungry," he said.

"Me, too."

"We should go in and get a snack."

"No."

"No?" Dante grunted. "Who made you team leader?"

I gave Dante the stink eye. "I'm not giving orders. I'm following them."

Dante threw his head back into his seat and groaned. "This is torture. I don't do stakeouts. I take action."

We'd only been outside the A&P five minutes. This was going to be a fun mission.

"Tough tits," I said.

That made Dante smile wide. He was such a boy. All it took was food or a naughty word to get a grin out of him.

Several minutes later, he sighed and said, "Snoreville," before reaching forward and turning the radio on.

I retreated into my mind as I'd done a hundred times before. This wasn't a party, but I had plenty of practice waiting and observing. I was in it for the long haul.

Shortly after nine p.m., Buck walked out of the A&P. Dante's chair was reclined and his eyes were closed. Not exactly an elite spy. I smacked his shoulder. "There's Buck."

Dante had his seat up in an instant. He leaned his whole body to within an inch of his window.

"That guy is my age. How come I don't recognize him?"

"Buck moved to Fairbanks from Anchorage four months ago."

"Ah, that explains it."

Buck walked up to a maroon truck and unplugged the engine from an outlet on the side of the building before getting inside. We followed him to Duck Pond Lane from a far distance. Tailing someone was a cake walk when you already knew where they lived.

Dante drove past Buck's place then turned around at the end of the road. Two cabins down from Buck's, Dante pulled over and put the Jeep in park.

"You can wait in the Jeep while I check it out."

"No way!" I said. "How do I know you're not going to break in and kill Buck while I'm not looking?"

Dante slouched over the steering wheel. "Well, then you're going to have to come with me, because I'm not doing this stakeout from the sidelines. I want a front row view."

My jaw clenched. I couldn't imagine what it must have been like for Aurora to be tossed into her first mission with this guy. I sighed. "Do you have an extra pair of those goggles?"

Dante grinned. "Nope, you'll just have to grab onto me and hold on tight."

"Or you could let me wear them."

"I don't think so. You should have brought your own."

Yeah, cause I really knew to pack infrared goggles.

The inside of the Jeep suddenly lit up when a set of headlights crested the hill. Dante and I went silent as the lights momentarily blinded us. The inside of the Jeep faded back to dark when the lights veered to the side and headed down Buck's driveway.

"Well, well. Bucky has a visitor," Dante said. "I'm checking it out." He reached across me, arm brushing my leg as he opened the glove compartment. I squinted in the dark to see what weapon he'd stashed in there this time, but he pulled out a flashlight. An instant later, Dante exited the car, right after he glanced backwards and said, "Tommy, stay."

I cursed under my breath as I scrambled out. The cold bit into me. So yeah, Fairbanks was noticeably frigid compared to Anchorage—the kind of cold that made my lungs feel like they were going to freeze solid and turn into an icicle lodged inside my throat.

Luckily, I'd put on a pair of combat boots for the trip north. Not-so-luckily, I had on a black tulle skirt; the one I called my evil ballerina skirt. I'd worn thick tights beneath it in an attempt at practicality.

I might as well have been naked for all the good my clothes did me. I felt like Eve wearing the fig leaf between her legs in the Garden of Freezing.

When I came around the Jeep, Dante had the trunk open, his hands shuffling through a duffel bag. He pulled out a ski jacket and stuffed his arms into the sleeves. Good idea. I pulled my own duffel toward me. The metal zipper was as cold as ice crystals. My fingers barely managed to grip the zipper, numb as they were. Good thing I'd packed my dark purple velvet coat on top. It wasn't a ski jacket, but it covered my ass. After rummaging around the sides of the bag, I found my arm warmers by touch and pulled those on, too.

There was a loud "clunk" as Dante moved a duffel bag to the edge of the trunk. He set the flashlight down and began securing his head strap. He looked

like a death row criminal headed for the electric chair. Helmet and chin strap secure, he screwed on the goggles. Once he had everything strapped and screwed in, he pulled on a pair of thick winter gloves.

What little light the flashlight provided bounced off Dante's teeth when he turned and smiled. "It's go time."

He closed the trunk and started walking down the road, away from Buck's cabin. I reached out for his arm. "Wait, where are you going?"

"You don't think we're just going to waltz up the driveway, do you? That would be too obvious." Dante continued walking. I had to hurry to keep pace. No way was I holding onto him like an invalid, but I had to keep close —as in body brushing and touching close—in order to stick with him.

Dante paused on the road and turned to face the woods. "We'll go through here, arc around his cabin, and come around through the back."

Between the night-darkened willow trees and thick blanket of snow, the world looked like it had turned black and white.

Dante took his first step off the road, and I quickly followed.

"Crap!" I said.

"What?" Dante asked, whipping his head around.

"Snow just went down my boot."

"At least it won't melt," Dante said. "Too cold."

Happy thought.

We trudged forward, Dante leading the way. The snow slowed him down despite his fancy-pants goggles. When he stopped suddenly I bumped into him Dante turned around. I leaned back instinctively to avoid getting knocked in the face by his scopes. The silly things tilted and moved as Dante looked me up and down.

"Nice coat. You going to prom later tonight?"

"Nice headgear. How's that retainer working out for you?" I returned.

The contraption shook over Dante's face when he chuckled. "I like you, Harper. You're like the little sister I never had."

Little sister? Enough with the flattery. Boy, did Dante make me feel like a wanted woman. Didn't matter. He was every bit like an idiotic older brother I'd love to smack a time or two. I stuck my tongue out at him then smiled knowing he could see me through his goggles.

Dante smiled back. At least I thought he did. It was hard to tell in the dark.

"Let's go, Minnie Mouse."

Jared hadn't been far off. Dante was like a bulky, bull-headed moose crashing through the woods, and I was the shivering mouse scampering after him.

Dante was right about the snow not melting in my boot, but it made my toes and calves extra cold and uncomfortable. And it was like getting sand in your shoe at the beach; only these particles stung, and I sure as shit wasn't frolicking across some god damn tropical beach.

Dante stepped over a fallen tree. I followed immediately behind. My boot sunk into the snow and more of the frozen stuff filled my boot.

Screw this! I was an informant. In-for-mant! I did parties, not field work.

Before I could bitch, Dante said, "We've passed his cabin, now all we need to do is circle around and come in from behind."

No shit we'd passed his cabin. I could see the warm glow in the windows casting an alluring light over the neighboring trees like an invitation. What I couldn't see were all the roots, rocks, stumps, and branches standing between me and the beckoning light. Even if we had daylight, it would be hard to walk through a virtual land mine hidden beneath snow.

I bumped into Dante several times, but I didn't care. I doubted he did, either. He kept plowing forward. Once we were on the final approach, I didn't have to rely on him anymore.

The smell of a wood fire filtered past my frozen nose hairs.

Dante unscrewed his goggles and held them out to me.

"What do you want me to do with those?"

"Hold them for me."

I scowled. "Hold them yourself. I am not your pack mule."

A smile was Dante's only answer. He placed his gloved fingers on the exterior of the cabin and walked to one of the cabin's four corners. He rounded the sharp edge. I followed.

Dante slowed as he neared the first window and carefully looked inside. "No visual from here," he said, sounding disappointed. He approached the second window, once more looking inside. "This one's no good, either. We'll have to try from the front of the house."

My heart lurched. I wasn't afraid of Buck so much as getting caught lurking in the shadows. This was Fairbanks. Trespassing could get us shot no matter who the occupant.

Still, I was no sissy, and I wasn't about to give Dante any reason to believe I was. I placed two fingers over my lips when he glanced back at me. He nodded and we crept forward.

At the next corner, Dante crouched and squat-walked his way to the front of the cabin.

Screw it. I was short, but not that short. I bent my knees and hunched along the cabin's outer wall.

A square of light lit up the snow several feet from the front window. Dante inched along the wall until his body filled the dark shadow between the window and light it projected. He straightened ever so slowly and peered inside.

Heaven help us if Buck saw Dante's head appear in the window. He was more likely to blow it off than bite him. We were in no man's land. Alaska. The farther north a person went, the wilder the inhabitants. Vampires weren't half as scary as residents of the state.

Dante stared for a long time. At least his head was still intact.

"Who's the girl?"

I nestled in beside Dante and looked inside. Luckily, the window was to the right of the living room where Buck sat on a beat-up couch, his arm around a young woman with long blond hair, their backs to us. A hockey game played on the TV.

"That's Buck's girlfriend," I said.

Dante clucked his tongue. "She could be dead by morning if we don't do something."

I rolled my eyes. "Buck wouldn't hurt Nicole. He's totally crazy about her."

"Right, killer crazy."

"You don't know a thing about vampires, do you?" I asked.

"I know how to kill them." Dante puffed up his chest.

"As though I could forget." If only he could hear the sigh inside of me.

Flashes of light from the TV hit the walls in quick succession. "Well, now that we know what he's up to can we please go somewhere to unthaw?" I asked.

Dante's shoulders sagged. "I guess so."

I didn't mind wading through snow mounds on the way back knowing we were headed for the car and comfort.

I hopped inside the Jeep while Dante removed his headgear. As soon as he got in front his dog stood up and wagged his tail.

"Good boy, Tommy," Dante said warmly. "Let's go get warm."

"Where are we staying?" I asked.

"Got a cabin in the woods. Don't be expecting the Ritz. There isn't any running water or electricity."

"Of course not," I grumbled. Ritz? Seriously? It wasn't even a Motel 6. Cabin in the woods. "This sucks," I said.

Dante nodded. "I know. We were right outside a vamp house and didn't even get to kill anything. When's Melcher going to stop dicking me around and put me on active duty?"

"Maybe when you begin acting responsibly," I suggested.

"Responsibly," Dante repeated as though it were the most offensive word in the English language. "This isn't the army."

Thank goodness. Give me Gothic wench over military green and brown any day of the week. Hell, no!

We left Duck Pond Lane and hit the main road.

"There anything to eat in this cabin?" I asked Dante.

Dante leaned back in his seat and drove one handed. "The cupboards are stocked. I hope you like Spam."

I straightened my shoulders. "I'll eat anything, especially if it comes out of a can."

Dante slid three feet before stopping at a red light. A smile lurched over his lips like a kid who'd just taken his turn down the slip and slide.

Trying to memorize the street names as Dante zipped down the icy roads was futile through the thick-as-fog ice mist. It made me uneasy. I had no idea where I was. No idea where we were going. No visibility. My internal compass had been thrown off its axis.

I was entirely in Dante's hands.

Being a passenger wasn't really my thing.

Dante turned off the main road down a dirt one. The cabins where spaced out and hidden down narrow wooded lanes. Dante slowed as he approached an opening in the trees. His headlights lit up a road that led deeper in. At least I thought it was a road. All I could see was a white, snowy path winding through the trees.

"I'm gonna have to gun it," Dante said.

Good thing he drove a Jeep. My car wouldn't make it three feet through this snow.

Dante didn't bother backing up for a running start. He slammed his foot on the gas. The Jeep gave a jolt right before we plowed into the powder. The loose seat belts in back rattled, and the shell of the ceiling creaked, but the rig managed to bulldoze its way through the white blockade.

I found myself crossing my fingers that we'd make it all the way to the cabin.

When the Jeep began to slow, Dante pumped the gas pedal. We blazed through, curved to the right, straightened out, and fishtailed around the next right, took a wide left, and headed for the small dark cabin that appeared in the Jeep's high beams.

Dante slapped the steering wheel when he came to a stop. "Made it!" He threw his door open and jumped out, quickly opening the back door for his dog to do the same.

Dante had me hold the flashlight while he loaded the duffels, including mine, over his shoulders. Much better. Let Dante be the pack mule.

I aimed the flashlight at the front door. Dante turned the knob and pushed it open.

"You don't lock it?" I asked.

"Only thing that would want to break into here are the bears, and they're hibernating," Dante answered.

Bears were smart.

The dog followed us inside, nails clicking over the hardwood floor. Dante dumped our bags on the ground and tromped over to a small table. He unscrewed the lid off a glass jar, dumped out a box of matches, and struck one. It flamed to life dramatically, lighting his fingers in its glow. Dante lit a gas lamp hanging over the table then shook the match until the wind swallowed the flame.

The gas lamp took over. Not much else was needed to light up such a small cabin. There were no bedrooms, no bathroom, nothing to section off the dining room from the kitchen or the bed and the cot in the cabin's two far

corners. Forget the living room. No one had bothered bringing in a rocking chair, let alone a couch.

And I thought cabins were supposed to be cozy.

Dante looked around and nodded once, solemnly. “The cleaners did a good job.”

By cleaners, I wish he meant the kind of merry maids who dusted fixtures and vacuumed floors, not Melcher’s crew who mopped up blood and disposed of dead bodies.

Aurora had confided in me about Dante’s interrogation turned execution of a human boy responsible for an informant’s death. The boy had died in this cabin. No, I definitely didn’t see sipping hot chocolate by the fire inside the death shed.

Dante clapped his hands together, signaling an end to such gloomy thoughts.

“I’ll make the fire. You’re on dinner.”

At the moment, I was too relieved to be out of the snow and inside a solid structure, no matter how small or cold, to worry about sexism. Let the caveman make his fire. Fine by me. Besides, Dante had mentioned the food came in cans. He’d gotten the short end of the stick in my opinion.

I made a beeline to the cupboards, feeling a burst of joy upon finding a can of SpaghettiOs beside a stack of Spam. I stood on my tiptoes and snatched the spaghetti. It didn’t take long to locate a can opener and pan—there were only so many drawers to look through.

Using a metal spoon, I emptied the pasta into the pan, scraping every last “O” off the ribbed edges. I snatched the box of matches from the table to light the single burner then rummaged around the cupboards again while the spaghetti heated. A grin spread over my face when I found a bag of Doritos only one month past its expiration date and, the icing on the cupcake, an unopened box of Hostess cream-filled cakes.

Holy Kris Kringle! It was Christmas in February.

The floorboards creaked with Dante’s movements around the cabin. The door of the wood stove groaned in protest when he pulled it open. It echoed with the sound of logs being tossed inside. The crinkle of paper followed, then silence. A few moments later, Dante gave a satisfied “whoop” that I took to mean the fire was alive and kicking.

For some reason, I felt like humming Christmas carols.

Dante walked over and reached inside a cupboard, pulling out a bowl. At first I thought it was for the chips—party time in the cabin—but a moment later, he was filling it with dry dog food. He set it near the table. His dog chowed down the moment the bowl hit the floorboards.

He moved toward the front door. “I’ll be back with water for the big guy and beer for us.”

Dante returned shortly with a gallon of water and six-pack of beer. He filled a bowl with water. Next, Dante pulled out his keys and popped the lid

off two Alaskan Ambers from the Alaskan Brewing Company, setting one down on the counter beside me.

"What's that you've got cooking?" Dante asked. The excitement in his voice made me smile.

"It's nothing out of the Cordon Bleu, but it's edible."

"Food is food," Dante said, walking over. "Is it ready?"

I looked inside the pan. A bubble burst through the sauce and popped at the surface.

"Yep."

"Great, I'm starving."

Yeah, nothing like hiking through the woods to work up a beastly appetite.

Dante crouched down to get tinfoil out of a bottom drawer. He tore into the cupcake box, unwrapped four individual cakes and wrapped them in the tinfoil. While Dante stuck the cupcakes on top of the woodstove, I dished the spaghetti into two mugs, sticking a spoon in each.

Using my elbow to squeeze the bag of chips to my side, I took a mug by the handle in each hand and set them on the table before going back for our beers. Dante quickly joined me.

"Nothing like a hot meal and a bottle of beer in front of the fire," he said. He swallowed a spoonful of SpaghettiOs and grinned. "These are good." He said it like I'd made them from scratch.

"Thanks."

We finished the spaghetti in no time then moved onto the beer and chips. The fire crackled and snapped. With each sip, I began to warm up and feel a blissful sort of serenity wash over me.

I never would have pegged myself as a woodsy girl, but this wasn't half bad. It was easy to leave behind all the cares in the world when I was sipping a beer deep in the woods.

Dante tilted his beer back and gulped it down until there was nothing left. "Want another?" he asked.

"Why not?"

I finished mine while he opened two more bottles.

"Let's strategize," Dante said.

I took a swig from my fresh bottle. "There's nothing to strategize. Let me define stakeout for you. It means surveillance duty, spying—like what you did with those fancy goggles of yours. Tomorrow we'll see if Buck's at work. Same thing the day after that until he has a day off and then we'll see what he does in his free time."

"You mean besides sit in front of the tube eating Cheetos?" Dante huffed. "Most boring vampire ever."

"Buck's actually a really cool guy."

"You sure are defensive when it comes to vampires. Did you date one or something?"

I glared at Dante. That question was way too personal. It caused pain inside my heart because it reminded me of how close I'd come to sleeping with Gavin. No matter how screwed up it was, I felt disappointed and heartbroken over someone who'd never even been mine. I felt the loss of possibility.

"I don't date vampires," I said coldly.

Dante set his beer down and gave me an assessing look before saying, "Good, because you deserve better than some half-human wannabe."

"Thanks. That's... touching."

"No problem." Dante took a swig of beer.

After we polished off the unthawed cupcakes, Dante offered to rinse our mugs and spoons outside with the jug of water he'd brought along. Guess he had better manners than I originally thought.

I tossed the spaghetti can, Doritos bag, cupcake wrappers, tinfoil, and beer bottles into a plastic garbage sack. That done, it was time to assess the sleeping situation. It made sense to take the smaller cot in the corner closest to the door. Both beds were beside the stove. A blissful warmth filled the air beside the fire.

I hadn't removed my coat until now. Folding it carefully, I tucked it inside my duffel bag. I unzipped my hoodie next and removed my skirt and top. I wasn't too worried about Dante walking back in. It wasn't like he'd make any moves with someone he perceived as a little sister, and I'd never been especially modest.

I slipped on a midnight blue T-shirt, leaving the thick tights on like leggings.

Dante returned with the rinsed mugs as I slipped inside the cot's sleeping bag. "Good idea," he said after setting the mugs on the kitchen's narrow strip of counter. "We should get some shut eye before another exciting day of surveillance."

I rolled onto my side, facing the wall. "Good night, Moose."

"Good night, Mouse."

I smiled to myself and closed my eyes.

Dante shuffled around the cabin. There was a loud puff of air, and the lights dimmed. Footsteps, followed by the pitter-patter of dog paws, made their way across the floorboards to the corner on the other side of the stove. Dante unzipped his bag and rummaged around. The sound of his movements faded as sleep pulled me under. I slept the sleep of the dead. My internal body alarm woke me in the morning, but I ignored it and went back to the land of blissful unconsciousness.

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9
Spy Duty

The bears weren't the only ones hibernating. Dante, the dog, and I slept in until midday. After dragging our asses out of bed, we ate cupcakes to tide us over before hitting up a McDonald's drive-through in the early afternoon. We ate inside the Jeep, across from the A&P where Buck had started his shift at two p.m.

Dante slurped his soda while paging through a Maxim magazine, followed by GQ.

I spent the time trying not to agonize over what it was about me that wasn't good enough for Gavin or any other guy.

At three forty-five p.m., Dante announced he was taking his dog up and down the sidewalk for a pee. He grabbed a pair of sunglasses from the clip on his visor and put them on, followed by a baseball cap.

"Good," I said. "You're getting the hang of this surveillance thing."

"Nah," Dante said. "I can't have anyone driving by recognizing me. If my mom finds out I drove up and didn't see her—woo—I'm in big trouble."

He hopped out of the Jeep and got his dog out.

While Dante led his dog down the sidewalk, I snatched his GQ and flipped through the pages.

Look at all the hotness in here, Noel.

Sexy young actors. Yes. This is what deserved my attention and focus, not Gavin. Gavin, Gavin, Gavin. He kept popping into my head. I was sick of him! If he was fool enough to choose Valerie, I should pity him, not pine after him. What the hell was wrong with me? Clive was right. No man would ever love me. He'd been right all along.

My lips pinched together. I slapped the magazine shut and tossed it on the dashboard.

When Dante returned, he let his dog into the backseat and opened the trunk, scraped around for a few minutes, closed the hatch, and returned to his post behind the wheel.

Dante groaned. "This is worse than sitting in an airplane. At least in a plane you're getting somewhere. Do you think Aurora's landed in Sitka yet?"

"No idea."

"They're so lucky. Gonna get the vamp house again. It's not fair."

"Wah, wah, wah," I said.

Dante leaned across the armrest, close to my face. "You can't tell me you're having fun?"

I shrugged. "Beats school."

"Yeah, I guess." Dante relaxed back into his chair.

Around six p.m., we did a grocery run. It wasn't like Buck was going

anywhere. Dante had me go into the store alone in case his mom or any of her friends were shopping. He made a request for more SpaghettiO's—at least one can each tonight.

Just after nine p.m., we watched Buck leave work. We tailed him home then turned around at the end of the road again, but tonight, instead of traipsing through the woods, we headed back to the cabin where I made another round of canned spaghetti.

We turned in shortly after eating. There wasn't a whole else lot to do in the middle of buttfuck nowhere. The novelty wore off really quickly after spending a day sitting in one place freezing my ass off with nothing better to do than obsess over a vampire not worth the energy it took to fire the electrons in my brain.

I held my phone half a foot away from my face and began reading a sample of Fifty Shades of Grey that I'd downloaded using the Kindle app. Ana met the sexy Mr. Grey in Seattle then interviewed him and drove back to Vancouver, Washington. What the hell? I thought this was a sex book.

I began speed reading until I saw Mr. Grey reappear in Vancouver at Ana's place of work and ask to purchase cable cord followed by masking tape and rope. After which the sample ended.

Dante chuckled in a deep throaty voice.

I couldn't see him over the wood stove.

"What?" I asked defensively. As if he had any idea what I'd been reading.

"I think Aurora's bored."

I turned on my side. "So, she didn't get the vamp house?"

"Don't know yet."

"Say hi for me."

"Umm, hmm," Dante said in a faraway voice

I purchased Fifty Shades and tried not to picture Gavin's face on Mr. Grey when he tied Ana up.

The next morning, I woke up to the sound of Dante singing Robin Thicke's "Blurred Lines." I pulled my head inside my sleeping bag like a turtle. Even through the layer of down, I could hear him.

The smell of coffee lifted my mood considerably.

I unzipped my sleeping bag in slow motion and swung my legs down to the cold floor.

Dante stopped humming. "Oh, great, you're up. So, I was thinking why don't you and I strategize? We aren't getting anywhere with this stakeout."

I leaned forward to put on my knee-high socks. "That's the point of a stakeout," I said with my head bent. "You don't go anywhere. You stay put and watch." I was beginning to wonder if Dante had A.D.D. God, I needed

coffee.

As though reading my mind, Dante walked over and handed me a mug. He held his own cup a couple feet in front of me with a dopey sort of faraway look on his face. At least he wasn't leering at me in my stockings, panties and T-shirt.

After swallowing loudly, Dante said, "Buck's just gonna go to work... again. Harper, I'm about to expire from boredom. Come on, you enjoy engaging with the enemy. Let's confront this sucker."

I set my mug in my lap. "What exactly is your plan, Dante?"

"I just want to talk to him, feel him out, that's all."

"Right, that's all." I rolled my eyes. "You're not going to try and kill or poison him?"

Dante slowly grinned. "It's his own fault if he bites me."

I took a quick sip of coffee. Ah, that did the trick. "I have a better idea. Since you're so insistent on meeting Buck, you can pose as my vampire boyfriend and then we don't have to worry about anyone biting you."

The floorboards creaked when Dante did a little jump. "Undercover as a biter. I love it! Never tried that one before."

"Are you sure you're up for this? Sure you're ready to act like one of those "things"?

Dante grinned. "Do I get to bite anyone?"

"Yeah. Me."

Dante's brows lifted. "Sure you're ready to be bit by a human?"

"I'm ready for anything."

"Good."

While Dante and his dog did their thing outside, I finished getting dressed. After that, we had an entire afternoon to kill. Somehow, we ended up at the movie theater. Buck wasn't going anywhere. Dante's dog stayed behind in the warm cabin. We came back with dinner, ate, and headed to the A&P shortly before nine.

"Okay, here we go," Dante said, gripping the steering wheel inside his Jeep and doing the push up move once more.

"We can go inside right before he finishes work or jump—I mean, bump into him when he gets off."

"Let's go in," I said.

"Right, right," Dante replied, nodding. "Cut him off before he has a chance to flee."

"Sure."

Tonight the ice fog had cleared, but it was so dark I still couldn't see anything beyond the black wall until we reached town and civilization. Dante parked five spots down from Buck. He turned the ignition off and gave his

face a good stare in the review mirror, turning his head from side to side, and tilting his chin down.

"Everything look okay?" I asked.

Dante rubbed his chin, eyes focused on his reflection in the mirror. "I don't look like a blood sucker."

"You'll be fine," I said.

"I'll be better than fine." Dante flashed me a smile before reaching for his door handle. "Let's do this."

"I'm ready."

Working with Dante was sorta like diving off a plane without a parachute, but he had so much confidence I trusted there'd be a net below to catch us. I was a woman of action, myself. This was going to work.

The cold provided extra incentive—driving us inside despite any qualms. Dante held the glass door open for me, and I hustled into the A&P. I felt a moment's panic when I looked around the convenience store and didn't spot Buck behind any of the registers. Then he emerged from a backroom, coat draped over one arm.

"See you next week, man," Buck called out to a bearded guy reading a comic book at the front register.

Buck was probably around twenty-three when he stopped aging. He had thick hair like Dante and good skin that held color even in winter, not your typical pasty-skinned Alaskan or vampire. Vamps like Buck broke stereotypes.

A nervous flutter entered my throat in the seconds before Buck would have to pass us and notice me. When his eyes met mine, he stopped moving. His lips formed a question mark.

"Noel? What are you doing in Fairbanks?"

"Buck? Oh my gosh. I never thought I'd run into you up here."

I slipped my hand around Dante's arm.

"My boyfriend wanted to show me his hometown."

Buck looked from me to Dante, quickly sticking out his hand. "Hey, man, I'm Buck."

Dante didn't hesitate to pump Buck's hand. That was a relief. I didn't know if he'd want to shake hands with a vampire, but I supposed he'd do anything in the line of duty—even play nice with his enemies.

"Dante."

"How long have you two been going out?"

I opened my mouth, but Dante beat me. "A week."

I would have given us at least two, but no matter.

Buck nodded a couple times. "And you're already taking a trip out of town. You move quickly."

Dante smirked. "Well, life's short... at least for Noel."

Buck glanced at the clerk up front and leaned in. "But not you?"

Dante's smile widened. "Who wouldn't want to see this mug walking

around forever?"

Buck mirrored Dante's grin. "Cool. I'm actually new to this."

Dante slapped Buck on the shoulder. "Welcome to the club. If you ever need pointers I make a great mentor."

I clenched my teeth together to keep from staring at my partner agape. Dante teach a vamp to be a vamp? That would be the day.

"Awesome, thanks man," Buck said. "You seem really chill. A lot of these undead dudes come off reserved, you know what I mean?"

Dante stretched. "That's because most of them were counts in a former life, and they're still walking around with a stake up their ass."

Buck snorted and laughed. He glanced quickly at his co-worker.

"Listen, you guys should come over to my place. Do you like pizza and beer?"

"Do bears shit in the woods?" Dante returned.

"Then follow me. I'm in the rusty pickup out front."

After Dante and I got back inside the Jeep he said, "This guy's not bad for a vampire."

"I told you Buck was harmless."

"We'll see."

"The only thing you're going to see is Buck drinking beer. He's new. Biting and drinking blood still feel unnatural to him. It's not like he's assigned a real mentor to teach him the ABC's of eternal life."

"How do you know all this?" Dante asked.

"I make it a point to know about everyone who walks through the doors of the palace. You take pride in your job, I take pride in mine."

"I'm beginning to see that." Dante eased out of the parking lot, following Buck into the street. "So, they really don't get any kind of master vampire instructor? Doesn't seem fair."

I pressed my lips together. I didn't even know how to begin to comment on that one. Dante almost sounded sincere.

Buck wasn't much for speed, which meant Dante had to drive slowly. He tapped his finger on the wheel and hummed a tune I couldn't make out.

"When do I bite you?" Dante asked suddenly. He slid to a stop, three inches behind Buck at a red light. "Before dinner? After dinner? During dinner?" His eyes widened. "There really will be pizza, right? That wasn't code for something else? Like the pizza boy being dinner."

"What?"

Dante puffed. "They made a meal out of one in Anchorage, or did you forget already?"

"Of course not. Don't worry. We'll be eating pizza."

"Good, because that would be going one step too far."

Who knew there was such a thing as one step too far for Dante? I'd say that was a good thing.

"And biting and sucking my blood isn't?" I teased.

Dante grinned in response. He groaned at the next stoplight we came to.

"This guy drives like he has all the time in the world."

Dante turned sideways, goofy grin on his face. Probably thought he was hilarious. I didn't take the bait. My attention turned to my lower legs, kicking up and down in the foot space between my chair and the dashboard.

"Nervous?" Dante asked.

"No," I said.

He shrugged. "It's okay to be nervous. Keeps the blood pumping."

I turned my head toward him. "Wait. Are you nervous?"

Dante's face lit up with his smile. "Of course I'm nervous! I have no idea what to expect tonight and I love it!"

It felt good to laugh. Dante had been right. All this waiting around got underneath my skin. Eating pizza and drinking beer inside Buck's cozy cabin sounded a heck of a lot better than watching him from the window in the freezing cold.

I'd suspected from the start that we were on a fool's mission, but Melcher ordered it and he'd want some kind of report. We weren't learning anything freezing our butts off in the Jeep.

Soon, we were back on Duck Pond Lane driving directly up to Buck's cabin.

Buck jumped out of his rig and waved us forward.

Dante parked and rubbed his hands together. "Here we go."

We exited the vehicle together and followed Buck up to the cabin.

Buck kicked snow off his boots beside the front door. "Come on in."

I stomped twice outside the door before following Buck inside.

Buck turned an overhead light on then added a couple logs to the fireplace. Only smoldering ash remained of the last one. It began taking life again with the fresh wood.

"I called my girlfriend from the truck. She's picking up an extra pizza."

"Thanks, man," Dante said.

"My pleasure, that's really cool we ran into each other." Buck looked at me. "I'll give you my number, so you can call next time you're in town."

"Cool." I didn't know about Dante, but I felt like a bit of an ass lying and spying on the most generous and chill vampire I'd ever come into contact with.

"I'll get us some beers," Buck said.

While Buck headed into the kitchen, I did a quick perusal of the place. Most of the furniture, like the cabin, was made of wood. The room was relatively sparse, but cozy. There was a well-worn couch in front of the fire, which was more than what we had at our base camp cabin.

There weren't any curtains on the windows. Not like they were needed in the pitch-black middle of winter on a cabin in the woods. Still, I wouldn't like that fish bowl feeling. It gave me the impression that eyes were watching me from outside. It wasn't the most farfetched idea—Dante and I had done it two

nights ago.

Dante cranked his head around, doing his own once-over.

"So, this is what it looks like from the inside."

"Shhh!" I narrowed my eyes at Dante.

"Nice place you got here, Buck," Dante called after our host.

"Thanks," Buck called back from the adjacent kitchen. The door of his fridge closed, followed by the sound of bottle caps hitting the counter. Buck walked in, three open bottles of Alaskan Stouts in hand. "Nicole and I have talked about homesteading further north."

"Fairbanks not cold enough for you?" Dante asked with a chuckle.

"Plenty cold, my man," Buck said, handing Dante a beer.

"Thanks," I said when Buck handed me mine.

"Cheers," Buck said.

The three of us tapped bottles and tossed them back. Wow, the taste was rich. I would have preferred something lighter than stout, but in the end beer was beer and better than nothing.

"Good stuff," Dante said, smacking his lips.

Buck grinned and nodded. "Go ahead and have a seat. Nicole will be here soon with the grub."

Dante plopped onto the couch without a second thought. He slung his arm over the back.

I sat right beside my supposed boyfriend, taking another swig of stout, and swishing it around before swallowing it.

Buck sat on a rocking chair in front of us and leaned back, holding himself in that position with the tips of his toes.

Dante tapped the threadbare upholstery with his free hand just above my shoulder and looked straight across at Buck. "So what's the plan with Nicole? Stay together until she's twenty-five then ditch her for a younger model?"

Buck's face dropped. "Nicole and I want to be together as long as we can."

"I suppose if you're really attached to this one you can wait and move on once she's lived out her life." Dante broke out into a wide grin. "Hey, it's not cheating if she's dead."

Buck lowered himself in the rocking chair and looked at the floor.

I kicked Dante. "You're such an ass," I hissed under my breath. Speaking up, I said, "Don't listen to him, Buck. Dante's a total liar. He hasn't even been a vampire for more than a year. He uses humor to deal with his recently acquired afterlife. Although calling it humor is debatable."

"Hey!" Dante said.

Buck looked at Dante closer. "So, you got sick, too?"

Dante squared his shoulders. "No, I wiped out, big time, man, snowboarding at Hatcher Pass."

I cleared my throat. Dante glanced sideways at me before resuming his story.

Dante circled his wrist in the air. “Then I got taken to the hospital where I got sick. Breeding ground for germs, ya know?”

Buck nodded. “Nicole’s studying medicinal herbs.”

Dante shot me a quick look that said, “Can you believe this vamp?”

Buck smiled suddenly. “Ah, here she comes.”

I stopped drinking, surprised I hadn’t heard the approaching vehicle until now.

“I’ll go help her. Sit tight.” Buck got up from his chair, leaving it rocking under the abrupt loss of his weight. He set his beer bottle on the ground and stepped outside.

The door had barely closed before Dante turned to me, frowning.

“This whole thing’s a bust. We should take this vamp out for being so boring.”

I snorted. “Come on, you know you like Buck.”

Dante rolled his eyes. “Sure, he’s very hospitable. Now can we eat, drink, and go?”

“Hold your horses. You haven’t even gotten a chance to bite me yet.”

“I can bite you back at the cabin.”

“No, you can’t.”

“Fine. Whatever. I’ll stick it out. I’m hungry...” Dante tossed up a hand. “For pizza.”

I smiled. “That’s the spirit.”

Buck returned holding two pizza boxes. His girlfriend, Nicole, came in a second later all bundled up. I was sure the combination of pizza and Nicole would settle Dante’s nerves. Nicole was a beautiful woman, and she didn’t need makeup and heels to show it. Her hair wasn’t quite blond, but close, and she had striking blue eyes that sometimes looked grey.

Plus she was nice.

“Hi, Noel,” Nicole said, eye’s lighting up when they met mine. “I couldn’t believe it when Buck called and said he ran into you.” Nicole removed her coat, scarf, gloves, and hat as she spoke.

I returned Nicole’s smile. “I was just as surprised. It’s nice to see you guys in your neck of the woods.”

Nicole had a nice laugh. She walked over to Dante and said, “Hi, I’m Nicole.”

Dante stood up. “I’m Dante.”

Nicole grinned. “Nice to meet you, Dante.”

While we’d been making introductions, Buck took the pizza to the kitchen and returned with a beer, which he handed to Nicole. She kissed him on the cheek and thanked him. I wasn’t the sentimental sort, but aw, they were so sweet together. Maybe now Dante wouldn’t be so glib with his remarks.

“Should we dish up in the kitchen and eat in front of the fire?” Buck asked.

Nicole smiled at him warmly. “Sounds good to me.”

"Sounds great," Dante said.

We followed the happy couple to the kitchen. Nicole turned her head toward us as she walked. "I wasn't sure what to get you guys, so I got one with everything on it."

"Good call," Dante said.

Once we were dished up and back on the couch eating semi-warm pizza off plates in our laps, Nicole said, "So, Dante, you're like Buck?"

Dante raised a brow. "Incredibly charming and handsome? Why yes, Nicole, I am."

Nicole looked momentarily confused then her lips extended and she quickly laughed. "You're funny."

Oh, Nicole, don't say the words. Dante was suddenly sitting an inch taller on the couch.

"No, it's okay," Dante said. "I know what you mean and yes, I am immortal."

Good thing I hadn't taken a sip of beer. I would have snorted it out of my nose.

Buck set his slice of pizza down. "I wonder why we're like this."

"Why wonder?" Dante asked. "Just enjoy the ride."

Nicole and Buck glanced at each other. Vampirism didn't seem to strike them as a thrill ride. That was another thing that struck me as unique about Buck the first time I met him. He acted like this was an affliction rather than a gift.

When Dante's words produced no comment, he chewed several times then asked, "So, Nicole, what do you do for a living?"

Nicole exchanged another quick glance with Buck. She sat in a chair next to Buck's. Their legs intertwined at the ankles, like hand holding for feet. She unhooked it now and slouched in her seat, hair falling forward.

"Well, I was working as a receptionist for a dentist, but then I got offered this other job that pays really well."

It was my turn to exchange glances with Dante. Why did this sound like it was going somewhere weird?

"This man, this patient of Dr. Bradly's, was some kind of scout for a vampire named Diederick."

Dante glanced at me. I shook my head. Never heard of the guy.

"He's an event planner."

Dante gave a little grunt beside me.

"He puts together these super fancy, expensive tastings."

I swear Dante's ears visibly perked up.

"Tastings?" he asked.

Buck placed a hand on Nicole's arm and nodded for her to continue.

"It's for well-to-do vampire winos. They're looking for young women to drink expensive wine and then vampires pay to feed on them."

"Nicole!" I didn't shock easily, but this one came at me out of left field.

Wine tastings through women's blood? Now I'd heard everything.

Maybe it shouldn't have surprised me that Dante looked positively delighted by this discovery. He set his plate aside and began massaging his hands gleefully.

Nicole looked surprised by my tone. Probably unexpected coming from a Goth wench and regular at Marcus's parties. It wouldn't take a trained spy to notice me accompanying different vamps every weekend to the rooms upstairs.

"Is it safe?" I asked.

"Perfectly safe, I promise," Buck said. "I checked it all out before Nicole would even take the interview with Diederick. The entire operation is regulated under the strictest rules. No one crosses Diederick."

Why didn't I find that comforting?

Nicole nodded. "I would never put my life at risk. No sum of money is worth that. But Buck and I did check it out thoroughly, and Diederick was very forthcoming. He's not the friendliest undead guy, but he takes his work seriously and leaves no room for error."

"And I'm there each time," Buck said.

"That's right," Nicole said. "Buck drives me to every event. Diederick has no problem with that. It saves him having to arrange a cab."

I leaned forward. "What exactly is it you do at these things again?"

"I put on a nice dress, drink a whole lotta expensive wine, and let vampires have a taste."

Dante was literally on the edge of his seat, about ready to fall off the couch.

"I want to go," he said.

Buck jutted his chin forward. "Do you have fifteen hundred dollars?"

"No, why?"

Buck gave Dante a pointed look.

Dante's eyes expanded. "Are you shitting me?"

"Nope."

Dante reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. "I've got fifteen dollars. How does that work? Do you think Diederick would take a solid fifteen?"

Nicole and Buck's shoulders relaxed when they laughed.

Dante gave me a slight jab. "Hey, Noel, can you spot me fifteen large ones?"

I crossed one leg over the other. "No, but I can drink a bottle of Two-Buck Chuck and let you suck it from me."

Buck laughed harder. "You two are a riot. You should come up to Fairbanks more often."

"I don't know about that," Dante said. "From the sounds of it, your social scene is a little out of my league."

"Most of the parties actually take place in Anchorage," Nicole said.

“Diederick plans them all around the state, but he has the most regulars in the big city. I’ll be coming down more in the fall.”

Buck tapped his foot on the floorboard. “We figure a couple seasons of Nicole working these tastings and we’ll have a down payment on some land.”

“How much do you make?” I asked.

“Five thousand per night, plus travel expenses, tips, and a bonus at the end of the season.”

I stared beyond Nicole’s shoulder mulling that over. It had a certain temptation to it. A couple events like that could buy me some real furniture.

“Do you get a discount or something?” Dante asked Buck.

“No man, I stay out of the private rooms, but I am allowed to mingle in the main room. A lot of vamps want to check it out before investing the dough. Diederick entertains them in the main chamber. That’s where I hang until the end of the night. Nicole has one this Friday night. You two should check it out if you’re still in town.”

“Oh, we’ll still be in town,” Dante said.

“Cool,” Buck said. “We can hang together.”

“You two might want to borrow some clothes,” Nicole said. “Diederick isn’t as eccentric as Marcus.” She said you two, but she looked directly at me.

I took it the Goth look wasn’t in style among the wine snobs.

“You can borrow one of my dresses, Noel. It will be a little long and roomy, but I can pin it in.”

“Okay, thanks.” Guess our stakeout had just turned into a recon mission.

Dante and I helped clear up and wash the dishes before leaving. It didn’t take long when there were only three plates and empty beer bottles to pick up.

The moment we were out of the cabin and back in the Jeep, Dante slapped the steering wheel and let loose a “whoop!”

Bet he was glad we didn’t eat and run.

“Melcher is going to shit a brick when he finds out about this. Have you heard of anything like this before?”

I shook my head. “Never.”

“Man oh man, we hit the jackpot,” Dante said, drumming the steering wheel with the palms of his hands.

“Don’t feel so bad about Sitka anymore?”

“This is better than anything they can find in Sitka.”

Dante made his way down the wooded drive.

“It’s like human trafficking, mutilation, alcohol abuse, and prostitution all rolled into one.”

“Not really,” I said, swinging my foot back and forth. “It’s not prostitution. She’s not having sex with these vampires.”

“Maybe she is,” Dante said.

“She isn’t.”

“Right, ’cause she and Buck are soul mates, and she gets paid the big

bucks to sip wine while vamps sip her."

"Think what you want," I said. "But I guarantee she's not sleeping with any of them."

"How about this Diederick guy? He sounds like a piece of work," Dante said.

"I'm curious to meet him."

"Well, you will. You and me both this Friday." Dante fist pumped the air. "Score one for Team Moose and Mouse."

"I'm surprised I never heard of Diederick, since he operates in Anchorage. Maybe Melcher has someone else on him."

Dante paused at the intersection longer than normal. When I looked over he had on a grin the size of our great state.

"Split his name in two and know what you get? Die Derick. And that's exactly what he's going to do."

No doubt about it; pretty soon, Nicole and Buck would have to come up with another way to save money for their off-grid oasis.

The rest of the weekend flew by in a flurry.

On the night of the tasting, Nicole had gotten all glammed up: dress, makeup, jewelry, hair—the whole nine yards. We hadn't seen much of her because once we arrived Nicole was escorted to her own private chamber.

She was right about Diederick. He wasn't the friendliest vamp on the block, but he'd been hospitable. The guy was all man. He looked about thirty-two and managed to pull off the clean-cut rugged look better than Josh Holloway. His thick brown hair almost touched his shoulders, and he had a trim scruff of facial hair under his nose and chin.

When he wasn't mingling, he sat on an armchair, glass of red wine in hand. Even slouching Diederick looked like he meant business, as his cool gaze watched everyone in the room. He wore a fitted suit that probably cost as much as Nicole made in a month.

Dante behaved himself admirably considering he was in a room filled with vampires. He kept up the ruse of being a visiting vampire from Anchorage and got his name on Diederick's client list. His foot was officially inside the door.

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10
Homeless

With the exception of one lamp in the living room, the apartment was dim when I got back to town Sunday evening. The phish of the shower entered my eardrums as I walked past the bathroom. A crack of light lined the bottom of the door.

I passed, heading straight for my room. When I switched the light on I had to blink several times before I could process the empty room. All my things were gone: junk furniture, clothes and all. My duffel bag slipped through my fingers and fell to the floor.

I stomped into the hallway and pounded on the bathroom door. "Trudy, where the hell are my things?"

The shower stopped. Silence followed until I pounded again.

"Trudy, I said where the hell are my things?"

"Noel?" Her voice wavered at first. "Is that you?"

"No, it's your stalker." Okay, that was mean and not something I liked to joke about, but I was seriously pissed off. Clearing out my room behind my back was one of the most heinous things any chick had ever done to me.

Trudy yanked the door open a foot. She had a cream-colored towel wrapped around her body. Her hair hung dripping and tangled over her bare shoulders.

"You scared the hell out of me!" she snapped.

"Where are my things?" I demanded.

"Your things?" Trudy opened the door wider and glared at me. "Your dad came by and got all your stuff. He said you asked him to. I figured you didn't want to face us after taking off without notice."

"I didn't take off," I cried at the same time my mind screamed, "That asshole!" In my agitation, my arms and hands began gesturing through the misty air entering the hallway. "I was out of town for a couple days."

"You were gone a week."

"Five days. Anyway, the point is I was of town and now I'm back and my stuff is gone."

Trudy's fist tightened around her towel. "Your dad said you were moving back home. Why would he lie?"

"Because he's a pathological liar!" I yelled. That's it, my temper had reached boiling point two seconds ago, and now I was overflowing with emotion.

Trudy's eyes narrowed on me. "Don't yell at me, Noel."

I glared back. "What am I supposed to wear now? Where am I supposed to sleep?"

"So go get your things back."

Words failed me as I stared into Trudy's face. Would she retrieve her things if it meant going through the gates of hell to get them back? Why not shove me directly into the fire pit? Maybe douse me with kerosene while she was at it.

Conniving Clive. Hadn't lost his touch. He couldn't force me to leave, so he'd hijacked the few possessions I'd amassed since leaving home. That left me with the dirty clothes in my duffel and what I had on right now.

I turned on my heel and retrieved my duffel bag.

"Thanks to you, I'm now homeless!" I yelled at Trudy as I passed her on my way to the door.

Her lips formed a tight frown.

I took my key to the apartment off my key ring and threw it on the kitchen counter then stormed out the door. The outer hallway echoed with the sound of my angry footsteps. The walls felt like they were closing in on me. I wanted so bad to get out, but at the same time, I had nowhere to go.

The touch of the cold air calmed me as I took shallow breaths outside. I dumped my duffel bag in the trunk of my car and pulled out my phone, dialing my go-to girl first thing.

"Hey, Whit. I need a place to crash."

"Oh my God, Noel, I'm so sorry. I'm grounded. Like seriously grounded."

My heart dropped. "What about Hope?" I asked, knowing the answer wouldn't be good.

Whitney sighed. "Her mom kicked her out... again. She's staying with her cousin. Aren't you close with Aurora? Why don't you ask her?"

Mrs. Sky hadn't looked too happy the time I came over to talk to Aurora. Asking felt awkward. I'd rather not share all my personal shit with her. Suddenly I wouldn't be Noel Harper, the tough, poetic undercover vampire hunter. I'd be Noel Harper, the pathetic girl who tried to take her own life because she was too weak to deal with reality. Noel Harper, whose own father tormented her, stalked her, and stole her stuff.

I doubted Aurora would be able to understand what I was going through. She'd grown up with nice, normal parents. She'd mentioned her dad taking off, but it wasn't like she was five anymore. In several months, she'd graduate from high school. Before her car accident, she'd lived a sheltered life. She'd never skipped class, gotten wasted, or had sex. Even that stuff seemed like minor detours on her path down the straight and narrow. Now she was working her ass off to graduate and keep things as normal as possible.

Aurora was a stubborn one. Nothing could ever be normal for us again. We were linked by blood to vampires, and it was our duty to keep innocent people safe from rogue vamps. Somebody had to do it. We had that in common. I supposed it was a sort of lifelong bond. Like sisterhood.

I took a deep breath and dialed Aurora's number. It went straight to her answering service.

Now what?

If I called Melcher he'd place me with one of his staff members until he found something more permanent. Been there, done that. The last thing I wanted right now was a parental figure watching over me.

Even a cheap motel was out of my budget for more than three days. I needed a temporary place to crash, and I needed it now.

My brain wasn't processing. Perhaps my phone had the answer. Making my way down my list of contacts, I paused on Fane Donado. He'd helped in a heartbeat when Aurora's life was at stake. Would he help me?

I pressed "dial" before I could wimp out.

"Yes, Noel?" he said with a hint of irritation.

Well, no going back now.

"I need your help."

"Is Aurora okay?" Fane asked, his voice suddenly changing to one of concern.

Maybe I should have been flattered that guys didn't perceive me as a damsel in distress. Then again, maybe I should've felt annoyed.

"Aurora's fine," I said. "It's me. I'm in trouble, and I've got no one to help me. I wouldn't have called if I had someone else."

Fane's voice softened. "Where are you?"

"In my car, outside my former apartment, which was emptied by my father this weekend. He didn't leave me anything, Fane." My voice cracked. Oh, no. God, no. Once it started cracking, there was no holding it together. The world crumbled and fell apart once that first tiny fissure entered my voice. "All I've got is the clothes on my back and nowhere to go." I began sobbing. There was no holding back.

"Hey," Fane said, sounding firmer now. "You do have somewhere to go. You remember where I'm at?"

"Yes," I said, sniffing.

"So come over now, and we'll figure this out."

I started crying harder.

"It's going to be okay," Fane said. "I'm home so you can head over now."

"Okay," I choked out.

"See you real soon, Noel."

I ended the call and began wailing. No way was I showing up in such a mess. I had to get it out of my system first. Clive had done it again, torn me to shreds without even placing a finger on me.

He'd come into what was supposed to be my safe place, invaded my sanctuary, taken away all my things—crappy things, but they were mine. Then he had the mad idea to use those scraps of my life like cheese in a mousetrap.

After I'd gotten all the angry tears out of my system, I dug out a black T-shirt from my duffel and mopped up my face.

I'd sworn to myself I'd never let Clive make me cry again. This time, I meant it.

Straightening my shoulders, I drove across town to Fane's duplex. I'd been there once before, when I brought bandages to patch Aurora up after she'd been stabbed multiple times by her vampire captives. It wasn't as though they could drink her blood. Aurora had been in critical condition. Guess I wasn't the only one having a bad year.

I took the closest spot on the street, not wanting to take up space in the driveway. My heart skipped a beat as I walked up to the front porch. I'd left my duffel bag in the car, as I didn't want to go making presumptions that Fane would really take me in. Maybe he'd simply talk to me, tell me to suck it up, and send me on my way.

A sob threatened to work its way up my throat. I swallowed it down. No more fissures. No more cracks.

Before I got to the door, it swung open. Fane ushered me inside. I stomped the snow off my combat boots on the mat in front of the door then unlaced and removed them from my feet.

Fane's roommate had stopped reading his book on the couch to watch my every move. I'd nearly forgotten about him. At least he wasn't putting up a fuss like he had the last time I was here.

"Come in," Fane said. "Make yourself comfortable. You remember my roommate, Joss?"

I inclined my head slightly. Joss made no movement or comment, just kept staring at me like I was some kind of circus freak. Guess it didn't help that he knew I was an undercover vampire informant. I was as good as a rat in his eyes.

Fully aware of the two vampires watching me, I stepped across the room to a big leather armchair, sat and curled my legs in. It spoke volumes that I felt safer with vampires than my own father.

"Can I get you something to drink?" Fane asked.

"A cup of tea?" Joss asked suddenly, leaning forward on the couch.

I was surprised by the warmth in his voice, which didn't match his expression. Unlike Fane, he had a strong accent, which was obviously European—British sounding.

"Uh..." I looked between Joss and Fane.

Fane grunted. "She doesn't want tea. Noel wants a drink, am I right? Something strong?"

"Sounds good." Sure. Why not? Something to numb the pain.

While Fane was in the kitchen, I avoided Joss's stare by looking around the living room. There was a lot of antique furniture. Everything was tidy, but not sterile. It all looked cozy in a bookish sort of way. It fit Fane's roommate, sitting with a hardback book in one hand and a mug of what I could only assume was tea in the other. I'd always pictured Fane with something more retro, black lights and glow-in-the-dark skulls, for instance.

Fane returned with a glass of red wine and something tinted pink with a slice of lime on top. He handed me the pinkish drink.

"Thank you," I said, taking it from his pale fingers. The cold liquid felt good going down my throat, which had burned with tears not that long ago.

Fane sat beside Joss on the couch and crossed one leg over the other. "What happened?"

Normally I wasn't fond of sharing my home life with anyone else. To speak of it made it real. Made me sound weak. Made me a victim.

But there was something so candid about the way Fane looked at me. He was the only person I'd ever met who I felt I could spill all my guts out to. And then there was Joss. The book lowered to his lap.

I wasn't sure what it was about him, but I didn't care if he listened in. From the little I knew of Joss, which was very little considering my job was to know at least something about the vampires I came into contact with, the guy was a recluse. Probably wouldn't survive in this everlasting life of his without Fane.

The ice crackled inside my glass as I drank half the cocktail. I eyed the floor, looking for a place to set it. Fane pointed to a coaster on the coffee table. Once I'd gotten up, set it down, and resettled, I opened my mouth to speak. I'd planned to start with recent events—Clive finding me, taking my things, or maybe start with the suicide attempt, but when the words came out they were from much further back than that.

"When I was twelve, I once left a carton of milk out all day. When my dad came home and saw it, he very calmly picked up the carton, brought it to me, and made me drink the entire thing. It was in the summer time, and it had started to sour." My nose wrinkled. "It had this rancid taste from the very first sip. I told him no. Then he grabbed my arm and squeezed it until I thought my bones would break. He did that a lot. I used to wish he'd break my arm, snap my bones so I could show the world something physical my daddy had done to me, but since he was a physician, he knew just the right amount of pressure to apply without damaging the bone or tissue. My skin never even turned blue. Doctors," I said, as though it were a joke—like one of those stereotypes. Lawyers as sharks. Teachers as bookworms. Doctors as monsters who hurt their own children when they were supposed to be healers.

Fane set his wineglass on the coffee table.

"Anyway, he terrified me, so I started drinking the milk. A third of the way through I felt like I was going to throw up. I started gagging, but he didn't care. He grabbed me by my jaw, pinched my nose and began forcing the milk into my mouth. It started running down my chin and neck and clothes, dripping all over the floor, but still he kept forcing it. Then I threw up. He stepped back just in time to avoid the mess. I'll never forget his face. He looked at me with so much disgust. Me. I disgusted him. Not his behavior." I tapped a finger on the tight leather armrest, watching my black nail move up and down. "I thought at least that was the end of it but after I was done

heaving he forced me to finish the last of the milk."

I don't know why I'd chosen that story. There were so many. Endless tales of insanity. I figured that had been the first time it really hit me that my dad wasn't just cruel, he was crazy, and there wasn't a thing I could do about it.

I stared at the floor. Fane and Joss didn't speak, so I kept talking. "He was never the kind of man who yelled or got angry. The calmer he was, the scarier. He always took this sorta sick delight in tormenting me, my mom, and little brother. He got this light in his eyes. Pain. Fear. He thrives off the suffering of others."

"You said he's a doctor?"

I looked at Fane, who looked back at me with the kind of certain patience a lion uses to watch a zebra passing through the savanna.

"Where does he work?" Fane prodded.

A sick thrill ran through my body with the initial thought that Fane meant to kill him. Did that make me as demented as Clive? Could killing be justified when it meant ridding the world of a truly evil person? A man who hurt people and would continue until his dying breath?

Fane held my gaze.

"Valley Hospital," I said.

He nodded. "I'll stop by tomorrow."

The way Joss made a stink last time Fane got involved with Aurora's kidnapper, I expected him to make another big fuss now, but his lips remained closed.

Fane leaned forward. "You can stay here until you find a new place."

Again, Joss didn't protest.

"Thank you," I said. "Hopefully it won't be too long."

This was super nice of Fane and all, but I needed my own space as soon as possible.

"Sorry we don't have a spare bedroom," Fane said. "But we'll make the couch comfy."

"A couch is all I need."

"Do you have pajamas? A change of clothes?"

"I've got a few things in my car."

Good thing I had clothes from the trip to Fairbanks. Little did I know I'd be bringing them into Fane Donado's home.

Fane went to school the next day. I didn't.

He walked by the couch and into the kitchen. The fridge door opened and closed quietly, and then he went out the front door, shutting it gently behind himself. None of the blasting through the room with a song on his lips like Dante.

I lay on my back, staring at the ceiling, trying to come up with one good reason to get off the couch. Almost everything I owned had been taken. I had no place to live. Gavin was with Valerie. I rarely got to see my friends anymore. My friendship with Aurora was on shaky grounds. It was a little hard to put in the effort with my life falling apart all around me, and I'd never been a complainer. My shit was my problem... and now Fane's.

Something was going down today, and that thought pumped blood to my heart.

I sat up slowly and did a double take when I noticed Joss at the dining room table reading the paper with a cup of tea. How had I not heard him there?

"Good morning," he said faintly.

"Morning," I replied automatically.

"Were you comfortable?"

"Yeah. Thanks." I turned away from him and took a moment to sit quietly, thinking, waking up.

My duffel bag rested against the couch. I leaned down and retrieved a pair of black leggings. Fane had made up the couch with soft sheets and a thick down comforter. I flipped it aside, pulled the leggings on, and got up and headed for the bathroom.

When I returned, Joss nodded at a plate of toast and cup of steaming tea. "I made you something to eat."

"Thanks," I said, slipping into a chair across from him.

There were three kinds of jams and a stick of butter on a plate beside the toast.

Joss set his mug down. "I wasn't sure what kind you'd like."

I looked from the jam to the toast to Joss. "Why are you being so nice to me?"

Joss's forehead wrinkled in confusion.

"I'm a vampire informant, remember? I could tell my boss your name and where you live."

What was wrong with this vamp? He should be trying to kill me or at least kick me out while Fane was gone, not serve me tea.

Joss leaned back in his chair, his face relaxing somewhat, but never quite enough to lose the intensity trapped in his eyes. Maybe he'd become undead with that look and had to live with it forever.

"Francesco trusts you."

"Do you?"

Joss regarded me for thirty uncomfortable seconds.

"I only trust one person in this world. Francesco."

"So, Fane trusts me, you trust me by default?"

Joss didn't respond.

I reached for the butter, spread a layer over the toast, then spread strawberry jam on one slice over the butter, and blueberry on the second

piece.

Joss watched my every move, but it didn't bother me. I doubted he got out much or interacted with anyone other than Fane. In a weird way, it made me feel like a movie star. Poor guy couldn't take his eyes off me. That made me smile for a brief second between chewing.

"What do you do all day by yourself?" I asked.

"I read and I work."

"What kind of work do you do from home?"

Joss gave me that same mind-numbing stare before answering. "I'm a rare books dealer."

I scrunched my nose. I don't know, the words "dealer" and "books" sounded unnatural together.

"It's like a scavenger hunt across the world wide web. I search for long lost treasures, make offers then resell them for more."

Joss should talk more. I liked listening to his accent.

Joss wrapped his slim fingers around his porcelain mug. "I still attend the occasional estate sale."

"What about garage sales?"

He nodded. "I've made some of my biggest profits from those. People don't know what they've got. They toss items of value on the curb like rubbish."

I stopped chewing. "You don't think too highly of people, do you?"

Joss looked at me. His hand didn't move, nor his eyes, or mouth. I could almost swear he wasn't even breathing, and vampires breathed, at the least as far as I knew.

I shrugged. "It's okay, I don't either."

Shortly after breakfast, I stepped outside to call Agent Melcher and tell him my father had found me; I needed a new place to live. Melcher was the only person outside my family who knew I'd slit my wrists. He'd never chastised me or made me feel like a weakling. Melcher had helped me find a place to room after recruiting me so I wouldn't have to go back home. He told me everything that had happened had been for the greater good, that I shouldn't be too hard on myself. If I hadn't picked up that knife, we wouldn't have met, and I wouldn't have been handed the greatest opportunity on earth —to rid the world of evil forces. Melcher saw it as holy work. I viewed it more as police work, but on a much darker, secretive, and glamorous scale.

Melcher also made it clear that if I ever tried to off myself again I was out of the program and his good graces for life.

There was a short pause after I explained the situation over the phone to Melcher, minus staying the night with Fane Donado.

Melcher heaved a sigh. "Did you try making contact with your brother, Noel?"

Great, so he thought that somehow I'd brought this situation on myself?

"No!" I said defensively. "I haven't seen Chris in eight months." Not

since I sliced open my wrists. I might not disclose everything I should to Melcher, but I always followed his instructions—even the most painful ones.

"Did you go anywhere near your parents' house recently?"

"No," I said again.

Melcher could believe me or not. I had stayed as far away as I could from that insane asylum.

"I'll see what I can do. Where are you now?"

"At a friend's."

Yeah, let's leave it at that.

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11
The Fane Fan Club

A little after two, I began eyeing the front door. School had ended. It probably would be good if I at least made an attempt to call in sick. Maybe tomorrow.

I didn't know if Fane planned to come straight home or go do whatever it was he planned to do to Clive.

My heart beat out an erratic rhythm, and I'd broken into a cold sweat as though I were the one about to confront my father. Like Joss, I trusted Fane. I didn't know what he had planned, only that I had full faith in him. Waiting to hear the plan was pure torture, though.

At two forty-five, I was sure Fane had gone straight to the hospital, but a couple minutes later, a car pulled into the driveway. Fane walked in after that, kicking snow off his shoes against the door frame before stepping inside.

He shrugged out of his long leather jacket, draping it over the armchair.

"How was school?" Joss asked. He'd resumed his spot on the couch with a book after lunch, which he'd also served me: some kind of potato soup, salad, and an orange. My body hardly knew what to make of actual nourishment.

"Keeps me young," Fane answered with a crooked grin. "Not to mention it's the perfect place to round up reinforcements."

Reinforcements? Was he planning on taking the hospital by siege?

Joss set his book on the coffee table, got up slowly, and went to the adjacent kitchen. The microwave started. A minute later he brought a mug half-full of blood to Fane.

What a thoughtful vamp wife.

Fane thanked Joss as he took the mug and had a sip.

When Joss caught me watching Fane, he said defensively, "He needs it to stay healthy."

Fane chuckled. "Yeah, and so does he, but Joss refuses. Poor guy's practically skin and bone. No color in his face. He's the poster child for all vampires about what happens if you don't drink enough blood."

Joss glowered at Fane. "I'm still alive, aren't I?"

Fane stiffened. "That's right; you are. Maybe you should start appreciating that fact." Fane set his mug on the coffee table and scooped up his jacket. "I need a smoke."

I looked at Joss then quickly put on my shoes and coat and hurried after Fane. He already had a cigarette lit and was puffing on it on the front stoop. Fane smiled when I stepped out. "Want one?"

"Sure." I didn't consider myself a smoker, but I did light up on occasion with Whitney and Hope. Having a drag with Fane seemed like the right thing to do at the moment.

I took a cigarette from him, stuck it in my mouth, and let him light it up.

I glanced at the door. “What’s with your roommate? Has he always been this gloomy?”

Fane snorted. “Every day for the last 167 years—ever since I found him.”

Wow, that was a long time to be stuck with Eeyore. “Where did you find him?” I asked.

“Small village in England. He dug himself out of a mass grave.”

I flinched.

Fane nodded solemnly. “Not the most romantic tale of vampirism.”

“I hope you didn’t have to dig yourself out of a grave.”

“No, I did not.”

Fane didn’t elaborate, so I respected his privacy by not prodding further.

We stood in silence for several minutes watching our smoke clouds rise through the frosty air into wispy white vapor.

“Cigarettes don’t do anything for me,” Fane said suddenly. “Don’t feel a buzz. But I love watching the smoke.” This he said while watching his last white billow of smoke disperse into the atmosphere.

I felt a kind of peace settle over me. There was something poetic about that.

“I’m limiting myself, though,” Fane said. “I don’t want to end up with yellow teeth for all eternity. Not a big turn on for the ladies.” He grinned.

Thinking about yellow teeth made me want to stub out my cigarette. Not a pretty combination with my ivory skin. I pinched the cigarette butt between my fingers and slowly let it burn out.

I’d reached that moment where I had to ask a question, similar to the one I’d asked Joss. I crossed one arm over the other, careful not to get ash on my skirt. “Why are you helping me? I work for a unit of the government that kills vampires.”

Fane took a drag on his cigarette, blew smoke in the air above us, and smiled as though keeping a secret all to himself. “Tell me, Noel, how did you find yourself in the position you’re in now?”

I squinted at him. “As an undercover informant?”

Fane lifted his brows.

“I was recruited.”

I waited for his next question, but it never came. Silence was just as effective, if not more.

I threw my cigarette across the porch into the snow-covered yard.

“Fine, I tried to kill myself.” I turned my arms over. My black wrist warmers covered the scars, but I told him. “I slit my wrists, bled out, and nearly died. Somehow this agent found out and saved me.”

Fane’s eyes narrowed slightly. “Why would he do that?”

“Because I have AB positive blood.”

Now Fane nodded. “We all have some form of AB blood.”

He was so cool and smooth. Not to mention frustrating. I'd asked the question, and he'd answered with his own question—one I answered with something very personal. Something I never discussed with anyone.

"You didn't answer my question. Why are you helping me?" I prodded.

Fane's lips twisted into a smile. He glanced toward the road. Following his gaze, I noticed two juniors from Denali High—Reece and Daren—coming up the driveway.

"We came as soon as we could," Reece said.

"Right on time," Fane answered.

Right on time, my ass. I'd shared my personal shit with Fane Donado, received no answers in return, and now, how convenient, a couple of Fane's followers came traipsing up the walkway. Okay, I had to admit, it made me smile to see Reece and Daren again.

I waved. "Hey, guys."

"Noel, long time no see."

Daren stepped over and gave me a hug. I couldn't remember the last time someone hugged me. I caught Fane grinning behind Daren's shoulder. He had cool groupies, no doubt about it. I wondered if Daren and Reece knew how lucky they were to have Fane as their vamp idol. I could think of a lot worse choices.

The guys were dressed all in black... like Fane... like me. We looked like we belonged to a secret club.

"Why don't you two catch up with Noel while I change?" Fane said.

"Yeah, sounds good."

Fane slipped back inside. Reece pulled a pack of American Spirits, the same brand Fane smoked, from his leather jacket.

"Want a smoke?"

"No thanks, I already had one."

Reece handed one to Daren, along with his plastic lighter once he'd fired up his own.

"What exactly did Fane recruit you for?" I asked.

That's the other burning question I'd wanted to ask Fane: what exactly was the plan? But then he was even better at evading questions than I was.

Reece and Daren exchanged glances.

"What?" I demanded. It was a whole heck of a lot easier to act snappy with these two dudes than Joe Cool Vampire.

Daren flicked ash off the tip of his cigarette over the edge of the porch. "Um, Fane didn't want us discussing the details with anyone."

I placed a hand on my hip. "I'm not anyone. This is my dad."

"Yeah, he sounds like a real jerk," Daren said.

I shrugged.

Reece blew out a cloud of smoke. "Do you think we should go in and see if Fane's ready?"

Daren nodded. They stubbed their cigarettes out on the concrete stair

before depositing them in an ashtray on the window's ledge. Hadn't noticed that before. I'd pick up my cigarette butt later.

The guys waited for me to go in first. Joss and his book were no longer in the living room.

"So, you're crashing here for now?" Daren asked. "That's cool."

"Just until I find a new place."

There was an awkward silence as the guys looked around. I felt like I should offer them something, but it wasn't my place. It was a relief when I heard a door open and close down the hall. It wasn't until Fane stepped into the glow of the living room that I got a good look at what he was wearing.

Oh my God!

Where to start? He had on a translucent black, netted T-shirt with nothing underneath but a solid six-pack that was guaranteed to yield appreciation for centuries to come. Beneath the shirt, Fane wore a pair of black cargo pants and a studded belt. His combat boots were pulled over his pants, just above his ankles, laces untied.

Realizing that my jaw had been hanging open way too long, I snapped my mouth shut.

Hot damn!

Did wanting to jump a guy's bones after seeing his abs make me a shallow whore?

"Rock on. You look killer, man," Reece said, eyes bugging out nearly as much as mine.

Fane's hair was all messy hotness on top. He made Gavin and Henry look like choir boys. I guessed the next time Aurora was pining after Fane, I'd have more sympathy. A lot more sympathy.

"All right, gang, let's go," Fane said, throwing his keys in the air and catching them one-handed. Fane stepped in front of me when I started toward the door with Reece and Daren. "Not you."

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"I'm going to have a chat with the good doctor." Fane's lips curled into a smile.

"And them?" I asked nodding at Daren and Reece.

Fane's lips extended further. "They're extras."

"Extras?" What was this? A movie set?

Fane grabbed his leather jacket and breezed past the boys. "Come on, the others will be waiting."

"Wait. What others?"

Daren and Reece hustled after him with expressions that looked like kids on their way to the carnival. Reece turned around quickly at the door and said, "There's going to be about twenty of us, including your friends Whitney and Hope. It's going to be killer. Later!"

I stared at the door for several minutes, my heart doing some heavy thumping. I wondered how long before I could call Whitney. I didn't want to

interrupt any part of Fane's plan, but waiting around to hear what happened was torture.

I needed a distraction. Reading proved useless, but wearing out the rug pacing back and forth was a great use of my time. Joss remained in his room the entire time I was going out of my mind. An hour and forty minutes later, Fane returned alone.

He walked in without a word wearing black lipstick in addition to the ensemble I'd seen earlier. His expression gave nothing away. As he shucked off his coat I said, "Well? What happened?"

Finally, Fane showed some teeth. He leaned onto the armchair lazily and said, "I wouldn't worry about your father bothering you anymore."

"What did you do?"

Fane smirked. "I delivered a warning."

"That's all? A warning?" Clive didn't listen to warnings, he issued them. Why did I let Fane go? Clive was going to be even more unreasonable than before now that he knew I'd gotten friends involved and worse, told them where he worked.

Fane's eyes locked on mine. "It was a very persuasive warning. It's all about finding a person's weak points and using them to your advantage. Your father values his reputation at work. If he doesn't do as I say, I will scare off every last patient, and he knows it. Dr. Harper would be ruined, and that scares him more than physical harm ever could."

What Fane said made sense. Damage to his reputation would freak my dad out far more than anything else. It might be the only thing in the entire world that could shake him up.

As I was getting ready to thank Fane, my phone rang. Before I could say "hello," Whitney started talking into my ear.

"Is it true you're staying with Fane Donado... at his house? If I didn't love you so much I'd hate you."

"Hi, Whit."

"Don't "Hi, Whit" me. Why didn't you tell me your dick dad had found you when you called earlier?"

"It sounded like you had your own problems."

"No kidding, mind lending Fane to me?" Whitney giggled. "So, did he tell you everything?"

I glanced at Fane. "He was just beginning to."

"No way! I want to tell you."

"And me!" I heard Hope yell in the background.

"And Hope, too," Whitney said. "Should we meet somewhere... or come over there?"

"Let's meet at Tastee Freez," I said quickly. I already felt like I was encroaching on Fane's personal space as it was and getting out sounded good. Being stuck inside the same place all day was getting under my skin real fast.

"On our way."

"See you soon."

Fane nodded at my phone after I ended the call. "You've got a couple of loyal friends there."

"You as well." Guys like Daren and Reece were warriors, honored and willing to answer the call to action at any second. Fane seemed to inspire that kind of loyalty in people. Well, not Valerie, but she was in a class of her own and only loyal to one person—herself.

I slipped on my purple coat and leaned against the wall to put on my combat boots. At the door, I paused. "My boss is working on finding me a place to live."

"Stay as long as you need to." Fane looked sincere. Ultimately, he was a nice guy. Badass, sure. I could understand why his friends would do anything for him and why Joss trusted him above all others.

"Thank you, Fane."

Fane grinned with his black lips. "Anything for a friend."

I felt a flutter in my heart. Not the romantic kind, but the grateful, touched sort of sensation that he considered me a friend despite who I was. Lost for words, I nodded and walked out the door.

It felt good to hit the roads. Freedom was sitting behind the wheel of a car. Left here. Right there. The ultimate control. There were no cliques or "in" crowds on the road. Everyone in movement, anonymous.

Whitney and Hope were already in line at Tastee Freez when I arrived. I joined them and asked for a burger, fries, and a shake when it was our turn to order. We took our numbers and grabbed our usual booth around the corner in the very back.

"What did Fane tell you?" Whitney asked as soon as we'd tossed our coats on the bench and sat down.

"Only that he'd delivered a warning. What were the rest of you doing there? Daren and Reece showed up right before Fane left," I added.

"Those guys are wicked," Hope said.

Whitney cleared her throat and glared at Hope. "Not as wicked as Fane."

"Well, obviously," Hope replied.

Whitney leaned across the table, lips curving up.

"If only you could have seen Fane in action, Noel. He waltzed into your dad's waiting room like he owned the joint, the rest of us following right behind."

"Did you tell her about the black lipstick?" Hope asked.

Whitney's eyes lit up. "Oh my God, before we walked in, Fane put on black lipstick. I never wanted to kiss him so much." She fanned her face, which was more than a gesture. The hussy's cheeks were actually turning red.

"So, what happened?" I asked. The idea of a waiting room full of Goths at Clive's office painted a comical picture inside my head.

"The receptionist asked if any of us had an appointment and Fane said "no," but that he was there to have a word with Dr. Harper. When she asked

us to leave Fane refused. When he recruited us at school, he told us to all bring board and card games, coloring books if we wanted, so we started spreading out on the floor, taking over the entire room."

Hope nodded her head. "It totally kicked ass. Remember Cody, Andrew, and Jason from Algebra? They started playing hacky sack in the middle of the room."

"Yeah," Whitney said, nodding along. "It was crazy. So, finally your dad comes out looking all pissed off wanting to know what the hell is going on and Fane says, "We're friends of Noel's and if you bother her again, we're going to bother you. And we'll come by every afternoon after school if you don't back the hell off."

I was trying to picture Clive's face; his reaction. I was dying to know how he had responded to a mob scene at his place of work. That had to have thrown him. What about the patients in the waiting room? Heaven forbid they think Clive was anything other than the good doctor. I was starting to see the brilliance behind Fane's strategy.

"What did my dad say?" I asked.

Whitney frowned. "He told Fane that his relationship with his daughter was none of Fane's business."

A lump formed in my throat so large I couldn't swallow. "And then?" I whispered hoarsely.

Whitney straightened up, eyes fierce, as though she'd taken on Fane's persona. "And then Fane gave Dr. Harper the coldest look I've ever seen and in a voice that sent goose pimples to my arms, said, "If you contact your daughter again I'm going to make your life a living hell, and I will take pleasure in every second of it."

"What did my dad say?" I asked breathlessly.

"He didn't say anything."

"He looked like he was having a stroke," Hope offered.

That would have been too good, but this was pretty well near perfection.

Whitney sighed. "Fane Donado is the hottest vampire on the planet. Total knight in shining armor."

"Maybe he was a knight," Hope said.

"Or a prince." Whitney's eyes sparkled.

"Maybe he was a pauper," I suggested, which earned me a scowl from Whitney. "Unless he was of noble birth he very likely didn't lead a charmed life." And I thought I had problems. Fane could have been the son of a cobbler or a half-starved orphan.

Whitney lifted her nose. "Well, I don't care if he shined shoes for a living. I'd offer him my body in a microsecond."

Hope laughed.

"But enough about my fantasies," Whitney said. Her eyes sparkled when she looked at me. "I want all the dirty details."

I looked at her in confusion.

Whitney made a huff of impatience. “Where did he bite you? What did it feel like? Did Fane hold your head while he sucked you?” She leaned all the way over the table. “I want to see it. I want to see where he bit you.”

At that moment, a scrawny boy in braces walked up with our tray of food. I didn’t recognize him from Denali High School. Might still be in junior high. He didn’t look old enough to drive and certainly not old enough to overhear what Whitney had spouted without turning a hundred and three degrees in the face.

Whitney and Hope exchanged glances before bursting into laughter. The poor kid dropped the tray as quick as he could and took off.

“Hey, you forgot our numbers,” Whitney called after him, holding up our order cards.

Hope hit her on the shoulder. “He might think you mean our phone numbers.”

This set Whitney and Hope off into another round of hysterics. I might have joined them if everything in my life didn’t feel so topsy-turvy and out of control. Still, I couldn’t help teasing Whitney. “Nice going, ace. That kid’s probably scarred for life.”

“Boys,” Whitney replied with an eye roll. “Let’s get back to the subject of real men.”

I grabbed a handful of fries and shook my head. “Fane didn’t bite me, and he’s not going to. We’re friends. Friends don’t bite friends.”

Fane had looked seriously smoking in his Goth getup, but he wasn’t my type and thank goodness he wasn’t because Aurora was my friend. I had negative ten interest in a love triangle involving a vampire, a vampire hunter, and a vampire informant. No. Hell, no.

Whitney’s face fell in disappointment. She turned to Hope. “Hope, what’s the opposite of a whore?”

Hope stopped unwrapping her burger and lifted her brows. “A prude?”

“Yeah, a prude,” Whitney said, turning forward once more. “Please don’t tell me you’re turning into a goody two-shoes puritan, or I may have to barf all over my burger.”

“Eww!” Hope said mid-chew.

“Do I look like a prude?”

Whitney took a quick look at my corset and shrugged. “I just can’t believe you’re not taking advantage of a dream opportunity.”

“She’s not over Gavin,” Hope said. “I get it.”

“Okay, fine,” Whitney said. “But it would serve Gavin right if you became bite buddies with Fane.”

“Bite buddies,” Hope repeated. “Good one.”

All this talk of biting was making me hungry. I devoured my burger and fries while Whitney went off on a wistful fantasy involving herself and Fane. Halfway through my shake, I received a text from Melcher telling me to come in the next morning. Hopefully that meant he’d found a place for me to hang

my hat.

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12
Unusual Symptoms

The next morning, I left an hour after Fane went to school. Joss set toast and tea out for me again. When I told him I had to run an errand, he didn't ask any questions. I could see why he made such a good roommate.

Speaking of roommates, I hoped the next set worked multiple jobs and were never home. Sharing a space with other women sucked. Having my own place would be so cool. Dante mentioned having a roommate, so I doubted I'd get off without one.

I'd find out soon enough.

Walking through the base always felt like some kind of twisted joke. The men and women wore head-to-toe camo. The guys had shaved heads and the women wore tightly knotted buns at the napes of their necks. Made me feel like freak girl striding down the hall in black Goth wear: my hair loose and stringy over my face.

I stepped up to the front desk outside Melcher's office and was met with a frown. The secretary had me wait, but it wasn't long before one of the unit's specially trained doctors came out to collect me. He didn't wear camo, but a white lab coat was hardly comforting.

"Good morning, Miss Harper. Please follow me."

I followed Lab Coat into an exam room that didn't look much different than the kind at real hospitals.

"Please have a seat on top of the examination table."

I jumped onto the table, a white sheet of paper crinkling under me while the doc clicked the door shut. According to my calendar, I wasn't due to receive my shot for another week. Guess Melcher decided to have it done early as long as he was calling me in.

The monthly injection is what kept all of us ABers from turning into vampires.

The irony was that when Melcher recruited each of us, he simultaneously saved us and condemned us to a life dependent on the government's antidote. It was kind of weird knowing that eternity was just within reach yet simultaneously out of the question.

We were recruited to put an end to vampires, not become them.

When Melcher enlisted anyone with AB blood, he first infected them with a mix of diseases now known to cause vampirism in people with AB negative or positive blood. In boot camp, my instructor had referred to it as "activation"—a necessary evil for vampire hunters to successfully poison vamps with their blood.

But not necessary for those of us with AB positive blood. It only worked with AB negative.

Melcher hadn't been sure. Not until me. He'd said I was his final test subject. When my blood failed to poison a vampire during initiation, he'd come to the conclusion that people with AB positive blood were no longer candidates for assassin work. We could still be used as informants. I wondered if they'd start bringing in all blood types for undercover work. I hoped not. I liked to think I was special, even if my blood couldn't poison a vamp. Maybe my blood connection made me better equipped to deal with them.

The doctor walked over with a large needle and took my arm in his cold hands. I looked away. Sure, knives didn't bother me, but needles did.

The tip of the needle jabbed through my skin. I held my breath until it was over.

"Have you experienced any unusual symptoms since your last visit?" the doctor asked. Same question every time.

"No."

"Any concerns or questions?"

"I feel great."

Every month, the doctor went through the same routine and questions with me before sending me to check in with Melcher. It was like a teeth cleaning before seeing the dentist.

He scribbled some notes inside my chart then looked up and said I could go wait outside Melcher's office.

The door to Melcher's office was slightly ajar. Sometimes he left it that way for me to go on inside, so I walked over. But as I neared, I heard him addressing someone in a stern voice.

"You were supposed to take care of everything. Instead, I had to rescue you from a prison cell... again! I cannot keep cleaning up after you, Jared."

Whoa, hold the smartphone. Jared? At first I thought Melcher was talking to another informant or one of his hunters. Jared didn't strike me as the kind of guy who got reprimanded. More like the kind of guy who called the shots. I was glad Melcher stuck to his guns. He was far less intimidating than the likes of Just Jared.

I knew I shouldn't, but I paused a moment longer beside Melcher's door.

"Clean up after me? That's rich, Gabriel. Since when are you a comedian?"

I didn't hear Melcher's answer because I backed up as quickly and quietly as I could. Keeping my head bent, I slouched in a chair across from the secretary's desk.

Gabriel, I repeated inside my head. Gabriel Melcher. It didn't sound right. I didn't know a lot about Melcher, but at least now I knew his first name.

What I wouldn't give to know how Mr. Badass Jared ended up in a jail cell... twice. Maybe he ought to stick to recruiting rather than field work. I hoped Aurora was okay. Valerie could rot in a cell for all I cared.

A pair of legs strode past me. I looked up and caught Jared's backside as he receded down the hall. He hadn't even noticed me.

"You can go in now," the secretary said.

I adjusted my lace gloves and proceeded into Melcher's office as though I'd never eavesdropped.

Melcher stood, holding an open file in his hands, staring down at it intently. He looked like one of those hard-ass FBI agents on television.

"Good morning, Harper. Take a seat." Melcher closed the file and tossed it on top of his desk before settling into his chair. He leaned across his desk on his elbows. "I've got good news. I've secured a new place for you."

My heart leapt with joy.

"I trust you'll be fine on your own for a few months? Aurora can decide if she wants to move in after graduation or at the end of summer before university begins."

I sat straight up in my chair. "Wait a minute? I get to be roommates with Aurora?" Now my heart was really bursting with joy. It sounded too good to be true. First I'd get the place to myself, then I'd be living with a close friend who knew all the things I knew about vampires. No more Michelle and Trudy, no more hiding who I was or getting weird looks for what I wore and how often I went out.

"That's right," Melcher said with a slight smile. "I'd planned to find her a place near campus this summer, but now works just as well."

"Melcher, thank you. I can't tell you how much this means to me."

Melcher nodded. "It's a better situation all around. I'd rather have my team looking out for one another than stick you with innocents who have no clue as to what you do." Melcher tapped his finger on his desk. "There is one other thing. I want you to keep an eye on Aurora."

The excitement I'd experienced two seconds ago dissolved to ash. Melcher's hawk-like stare and crisp tone did not bode well.

My voice dropped an octave. "Why do I need to keep an eye on Aurora?"

"It's nothing you need to worry about. Aurora has already come forward about her blood cravings. Now I want to make sure she doesn't experience any relapses."

I wrinkled my nose, remembering how Aurora sucked down a full glass of human blood after sustaining multiple stab wounds. She'd jokingly called it a self-administered blood transfusion.

Melcher gave an approving nod at my reaction.

"As I explained to Aurora, blood cravings are one of the unfortunate side effects a hunter or informant can experience after their procedure."

No wonder the lab coat was always asking me if I'd experienced any unusual symptoms. Yetch! Thank goodness blood cravings weren't one of my side effects. I'd never experienced any that I was aware of.

"Aurora seems to be doing fine now, but a relapse might occur at any moment," Melcher continued. "That is why I want you to keep an eye on her

and report any suspicious behavior to me so that I can get Aurora immediate help."

Something about that sounded really sketchy, like black-hood-over-the-head, disappear-without-a-trace sketchy.

Luckily, I was a pro at masking my feelings when I didn't want to show a reaction. I'd had plenty of practice with Clive. All those times he wanted to see me crumble, watch me cry, I'd forced a stony expression over my face and saved my tears for later until I was so well trained, I rarely needed to cry even in private.

"What kind of help?" I asked calmly.

"Most times it's as simple as adjusting the subject's medication."

Did he seriously just refer to Aurora as a subject?

I nodded thoughtfully. "What kind of symptoms am I looking for?"

Melcher relaxed into the back of his seat. "Blood cravings first and foremost. Any significantly altered nocturnal patterns—staying up all night, sleeping all day. Hypersexuality. Any sort of compulsive, obsessive, addictive behavior."

"Excuse me?" This conversation had shot way out of my comfort zone.

Melcher stared at me for several unnerving seconds.

"Just keep your eyes and ears open."

For what exactly? Bumping and grinding? Screaming and moaning the whole night through? I never realized Melcher had such a twisted mind.

His frown deepened. "You trust me, don't you, Noel?"

"You saved my life." I said it with conviction because despite any sketchiness on Melcher's part, I never forgot that fact. But it didn't mean I'd report harmless vampires or rat out friends.

Melcher's jaw moved from side to side as though chewing on a thought. "You've done good work for this department," he said slowly. "You were worth it."

Wacky words and freakiness aside, I felt an inexplicable urge to walk over to Melcher and hug him. He'd found me a safe haven and said my life was worthwhile. I'd never hug him, of course. Not in a million years. But that was how grateful I felt at the moment. I could use some good news in my life.

Melcher rapped the file he'd tossed on his desk with his knuckle. "While you're here, I want you to look at something." He pushed the file across his desk.

I leaned forward to the edge of my seat, spun the file around, and opened it. A photograph of a young blond woman, about nineteen was clipped inside. She had a stony expression and the frown of a person utterly devoid of joy. Her image gave me the instant willies.

"Vampire," I said.

"That's correct. Giselle Morrel. Last seen in Sitka and considered extremely dangerous."

"Sitka?" I asked, looking up. I needed to get back to school or get on the

phone and talk to Aurora. It sounded like her mission didn't go as smoothly as mine.

Melcher nodded, grim-faced. "She's the one who got away."

"Did she have anything to do with Agent Crist's murder?"

"No, but her father did. He and his wife and son were successfully terminated, but Giselle managed to get away." Melcher leaned forward. "I don't need to remind you what happens when a vengeful vampire is on the loose."

My throat suddenly felt very dry. "You think she'll track her family's killers to Anchorage?"

"Again, one of many reasons why I need you to keep an eye on Aurora. If you see this girl, tell me at once." Melcher reached across his desk and touched the photo. "Do not engage with her. Do not let her frail appearance fool you. Giselle Morrel is a killer. She's been around longer than any of the vampires you've investigated before, and she's lost every last trace of humanity. Do you understand?"

I nodded slowly. "Yeah. I understand." Loud and clear. I'd happily step aside and let the vampire hunters take her out. Sounded like the perfect assignment for Dante.

I guess the whole "keep an eye on Aurora" assignment wasn't as peculiar as I first thought. It sounded like Melcher was truly concerned for her safety with this baddie blonde possibly out for revenge. At the end of the day, he was only looking out for us. Look how quickly he'd found me somewhere to live.

"How soon until I can move into my new place?"

"You'll have the key next week."

Now would have been better, but I wasn't going to complain. At least I'd soon have a place to live and could get out of Fane and Joss's lair. I was sure they'd be happy to have their living room back.

I couldn't wait to tell Aurora we were going to be roommates. Time to get my butt back to school. I got up from my chair.

"Thank you, Agent Melcher."

"You're welcome," he said without emotion. "Oh, and Noel, none of this leaves the room."

"Of course not," I said.

"Including the house you two will be sharing. I will let Aurora know after she graduates. She can decide if she wants to move in right away or spend the summer at home."

My heart gave a leap of joy. Melcher had said house. Not apartment. House.

I nodded. "I won't say anything."

It would be hard, but not impossible. Keeping secrets was part of the job, and I could understand why Melcher didn't want to dangle the house in front of Aurora right now. She'd probably want to move in right away. I was

looking forward to being roommates, but I also wouldn't mind having the place to myself for a few months—maybe even six if she spent the summer with her mom.

I did a half spin outside Melcher's office and headed to my car. I felt like a kid waiting for Christmas. Packing would be easy since Clive took all my things. Should have asked Melcher if the place came furnished.

I'd slept on a mattress on a floor; I'd be fine. Now to tell Fane the good news.

Knowing I'd soon have a place to live, I felt much more motivated to get up, get dressed, and go to school in the only clothes I now owned. And when Friday night rolled around, I was most definitely ready to follow my usual routine.

"I'm going to Marcus's," I announced after a late dinner with my vampire hosts.

Joss gave me a sour look.

"It's the weekend. It's my job."

"I'll go with you," Fane said.

"Okay." I was sorta looking forward to going off on my own. I didn't like the feeling that I was encroaching on other peoples' space. But it wasn't like I could say "no" after Fane had taken me in and dealt with my dad. I owed him big time, and we could split up once we reached the palace.

"I'm not going," Joss announced.

"Shocker," Fane said under his breath. He grabbed his coat and keys, calling out, "Don't wait up."

Once we stepped out into the dark I said, "We should take separate cars in case one of us wants to leave early."

"It's cool," Fane said, heading to his car. "I can stay or go whenever you want." He looked pointedly at the passenger door.

Guess we were carpooling.

We didn't talk much on the way over. Fane was the kind of guy who could do silence. That was until he asked, "Have you spoken to Aurora lately?"

"No, actually, and I really need to," I admitted. "Things have just been so crazy."

Fane looked sideways at me. "You don't like sharing your personal life with people."

I shook my head slightly. "We all have problems to deal with. No one wants to hear about my problems. And I'm not a whiner, not usually."

"I don't think you're a whiner."

My lips twisted into a frown.

Fane stopped at a yellow light and leaned over the car bench. "Noel, it's

okay to share your burdens with friends. And it's okay to ask for help."

I didn't know how to answer, so I didn't. What Fane said sounded good, but it didn't change the fact that my life was personal, not something to be shared publicly. There was enough woe in the world without me adding to it. No one liked to hear about that kind of stuff. Hell, I didn't want to hear it. I wanted distraction. I wanted purpose. I wanted escape.

And that's exactly what the palace provided.

"You didn't happen to be some kind of European prince back in the day, did you?" I asked, changing the subject.

"Why do you ask?"

"Whitney was wondering."

Fane stretched back in his seat, one hand resting on the wheel. "No, not a prince or even the second cousin of a prince, but I had far more power and money. Would that impress your friend, or is she all about titles?" Fane shot me a mocking smile.

I rolled my eyes, playing it cool. "Okay, so you were a rich aristocrat. Did you blow all of your money over the centuries?"

"How's that?"

"This ain't exactly a Lamborghini you're driving."

Fane tried to hide a smile, but I could see his teeth even in the dark interior of his car.

"Oh my God, you have owned a Lamborghini before!"

Fane had on a poker face and shrugged. "Maybe."

"If you have money why are you driving this piece of shit car or living in a duplex? Why is your roommate scouring the internet for old books?" Seriously, if Fane Donado was loaded he should really look to Marcus as a prime example of how to live it up in the afterlife.

"Maybe I wanted to find a woman who'd love me for more than my money." Fane raised a brow.

"Are you serious? That is so lame!"

Fane chuckled. "I believe most ladies would find that romantic."

"Well, I'm flattered you referred to me as a lady, but as far as the billionaire disguised as a poor man looking for real love—I think it's for the birds. Fuck love. I'd buy myself a mansion, a castle, fifty different cars to fit my mood of the day. I'd jet around the world. I'd go see the seven wonders... What?" I demanded when I saw the way Fane smiled at me.

"I've done all that."

"Fifty cars?" My jaw dropped.

"Not all at once. I'm not as lavish as you."

I huffed. "I suppose now you're going to tell me that all the money in the world can't buy true happiness or love."

Fane began humming to himself, watching the road as though I wasn't there.

"Well?"

He glanced at me briefly. “Why tell you what you already know?”

I had to go back to my initial reaction on this one. Lame! “Love’s overrated.”

Fane shot me another one of his teasing smiles. “I hope for your sake someone comes along and proves you wrong.”

Let any man try. I loved men as much as the next woman, but they couldn’t be trusted. They were always running off after some younger, hotter, louder, redhead.

I folded my arms across my chest.

“At any rate, I doubt your prince is awaiting you at the palace.” Fane chuckled.

Ha, ha. Did I look like the kind of chick who’d ever swoon over a fairytale prince?

“What about you? Ever come close to finding true love?”

“Now you’re mocking me,” Fane said. “Fair enough.”

I turned in my seat to face him. “No, really. Has anyone ever come close?”

Fane was silent for several moments before answering, “Yes.”

All of a sudden he seemed awfully intent on keeping his eyes on the road.

I took a deep breath. “Aurora.”

Fane didn’t bother denying it. “There’s something about her that gets under my skin. She has enough spark inside her to last a lifetime, but she’s also reckless. I never knew whether she really liked me or if I was simply a convenient bad boy who made her feel daring at the time.”

“Aurora is crazy about you!” I said the words before thinking. I just couldn’t believe Fane would think she used him as a scapegoat.

“Aurora broke up with me,” Fane said darkly. “Money doesn’t matter to her, but being human does.”

Aurora broke up with Fane to protect him. It had broken her heart. And what had he done? Hooked right back up with Evil Red. I wanted to yell at him.

“What about Valerie Ward? Were you looking for love when you met her?” Yeah, so my tone was totally sarcastic.

The vixen’s name got an instant smile out of Fane.

“That was one persistent hellcat. Wouldn’t take no for an answer. A little hard to turn down a woman who wanted me that badly.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet.” With his eyes on the road, Fane missed my eye roll, but I still felt it was necessary. Little did Fane know that Valerie’s persistence had nothing to do with liking him. In this case he really was the chump that Valerie successfully ensnared as part of her undercover work.

Fane tapped the steering wheel. “I guess you could say Valerie was part of my own rebellious phase—a taste of the wild side with a woman who wouldn’t break my heart.”

No, just stake it if she were angry enough.

"Why did you get back together with her?"

"Oh, that," Fane said. He let out a breath. "Val came after me again. I knew she didn't really want me back after I'd dumped her. I figured she had some hidden agenda, but I didn't care. I was upset that Aurora left me. Knowing Val's vengeful side, I preferred she do whatever it was she needed to do to me rather than take it out on Aurora."

Wow, bittersweet. Aurora had been protecting Fane from Valerie while Fane did the same for her, but neither of them knew it. Guess Valerie got the last laugh after all and, that accomplished, moved onto Gavin. God, I wanted to pull her ginger hair out by the roots.

Parking in a downtown neighborhood proved challenging every Friday night. Fane found a spot a block away from the palace. I didn't want to walk in front or behind him, so we ended up side by side walking down the sidewalk. It felt funny in a way that made my lips curve up. I was ready to get inside and go about my normal routine.

When we reached the front door, Fane held it open for me to go inside first. Marcus stood in the foyer with his hand on another guy's shoulder. He turned slowly, ready smile to greet his incoming guests. When he saw Fane and me together his smile widened, and he got this wicked glow in his eyes.

Marcus gave the guy's shoulder one more pat before stepping over to Fane and me.

"Welcome, my friends," he said.

"Hello, Marcus," Fane said in the most casual manner.

Marcus's smile stretched further. "Did you two arrive together?"

I glanced at Fane who lifted his head, matched Marcus's grin and said, "Yes."

"Excellent," Marcus said. "Never a dull moment. Can I get you two something to get you started?"

"I'll have anything with alcohol," I said.

"Red wine for me," Fane said.

Marcus took a step toward the kitchen. "Of course, right this way."

Although Marcus showed amusement at my arrival with Fane, he poured our drinks without further questioning. I could always rely on Marcus not to probe too deep. Don't ask, don't tell. No judgment. Besides, he always had that look on his face like he had it all figured out anyway. I didn't care what conclusions he'd jumped to about me and Fane. We were friends, and it felt good to have a vampire in my corner.

Fane leaned against the kitchen counter, sipping wine.

"I'm going to mingle," I told him

He nodded. "Have fun."

Mingle probably wasn't the right word, but it sounded better than spy. I made my rounds through the living room, stopping to chat with a few of the vamps I had some familiarity with.

"Noel Harper, where have you been?"

Prickles jammed at my insides when I heard Henry's voice behind me. Should have gone for a refill five minutes earlier. My glass was empty.

Henry had on a nice pair of slacks and button up top. His dark brown hair was well kept as usual.

He flashed me a friendly smile. "We've missed you at lunch."

Yeah, sure you have, and I'm sure Gavin especially.

I tried answering in a breezy, nonchalant tone and was pleased when the words came out sounding just the way I wanted them to—like I had better things to do with my life. "I was out of town." I looked over his shoulder as though talking to him bored me.

Henry's brow rose. "Family vacation?"

My eyes returned quickly to his. An instant scowl formed over my face. "I don't have a family."

Henry lifted his hands, dropped his smile. "Sorry, Noel. I didn't mean to upset you. I was just wondering where you'd been."

I'd never crushed on Henry, but I had liked him. Not at the moment, though. Henry thought I was some sad little girl, but he was mistaken. Boy, was he mistaken.

I could swear he never wanted anything to become of Gavin and me. This was a vamp that for all his honeyed words was most definitely not in my corner.

I lifted my head and flashed Henry my teeth in that cool, calculated way I'd observed from vampires. "It doesn't matter where I've been, Henry. I'm back now." I held up my glass. "I'm dry," I said. "Nice chatting."

I turned and walked away with an air of complete confidence. I could feel Henry's eyes on my ass. He could kiss it!

I was feeling pretty damn awesome as I approached the kitchen. Then I heard Gavin's voice.

Great, of course. Where one found Henry, Gavin wasn't far.

"Isn't it a little sad showing up to these things alone all the time?"

There was a malicious lilt to Gavin's voice that I wasn't used to hearing. I had no doubt he'd been addressing Fane. I couldn't believe Gavin was so hung up on Valerie that he'd talk to an old friend this way. Guess I never knew Gavin as well as I thought I did. Sadly, I was still convinced that deep down he was a nice guy. Valerie had gone and twisted his brain was all. I was sure of it.

Gavin was so focused on Fane, he barely noticed me walk into the kitchen.

"Maybe your roommate can teach you how to live without blood and women."

Did Gavin want to get his ass kicked?

Fane's calm stance against the counter didn't fool me. I wasn't sure what his plan was. At the moment, it seemed to be letting Gavin make a complete ass of himself, not that Gavin picked up on any of that, but if Fane didn't slap him soon, I just might.

"What's with the wine?" Gavin asked, nodding at Fane's glass. "Can't get the real thing anymore?"

God, was he going to let up or what? What a dick. I was sick of it.

Fane looked damn well near done, as well. He set his glass on the counter.

Despite what I'd said to myself a moment earlier about slapping Gavin, I didn't want either boy getting hurt. Why did they have to act this way over the vixen?

Quick as a whip, I stepped in front of Fane and wrapped an arm around his waist. I looked up and smiled sweetly. "There you are. Can we go upstairs now, before someone steals my room?"

Amusement danced across Fane's eyes. I enjoyed seeing how quickly his tight frown loosened into a lazy grin.

"Whatever you want, babe."

My mega smile was one hundred percent genuine. No one had ever called me babe before. It sounded so comical I nearly bit my tongue to keep from laughing.

Nothing was quite as satisfying as seeing the look on Gavin's face as Fane led me out. His expression changed from shock to outrage. My heart gave a tiny thump.

Fane squeezed me against him. "Enjoy your drink, Chum. I'm off to enjoy mine."

"Noel!" Gavin called.

I turned my head.

"So, you're with Fane now?"

Rather than answer, I smiled and said, "See you around, Gavin."

I willed him to stop me, yank me from Fane's side. Yeah, he had poor choice in women and he was being a complete dick, but he was also a male. A vampire male, but still bullheaded like the entire sex, no matter what his blood type. If anything, it made him more human.

But Gavin didn't stop us.

There was nothing left to do but continue the farce all the way up to the October room in case anyone was following our movements. Fane stuck a bat on the door knob and shut us inside. As he turned, back to the door, he crossed his arms and shot me a bemused grin. "What was that about?"

I mimicked his stance, arms folded, standing in the middle of the room. "That was about preventing a fist fight inside Marcus's pristine kitchen."

Fane smirked. "I would have dragged him outside first. I know the rules. Little bastard probably would have enjoyed licking his wounds."

I grimaced. “Well, I don’t want anyone getting hurt.”

“You don’t want Gavin getting hurt.” Fane took a step toward me, lowering his voice. “You like him.”

I shrugged and broke eye contact. “Yeah, well, I’m an idiot.”

“He’s the idiot,” Fane said. “Doesn’t even realize he’s dating a vampire.”

My heart did this weird thing where it bottomed out, actually causing me to stumble forward. “What did you say?”

Fane cocked his head to the side. “Don’t tell me you didn’t know. You’re the spy here.”

“Valerie Ward is not a vampire.”

Fane grinned. “You sound awfully sure of yourself.”

I wish he’d stop smiling like that. It was getting frustrating. “I’m certain.”

“Are you now?”

“Yeah, I am.” God, he was maddening. “Why are you so sure?”

“I tasted it in her blood.”

There went my heart again, beating loud, while my voice nearly lost all sound. “What did she taste like?” I asked.

Fane walked up to me and lifted my chin so that our eyes were inches apart.

“Death.”

I tried not to shake. Not only would Fane see it, he’d feel it with his hand on my face.

Gavin had said I tasted odd. Odd like death? Fane said Valerie tasted like death. Valerie had AB positive blood. I had AB positive blood. Vampires had AB positive and negative blood. We had their diseases, but we also had the antidote, unless it didn’t work. Unless it had never worked.

“Noel, say something.”

My eyes had wandered off. I stared back into Fane’s deep brown irises, ready to deliver my own bombshell.

“Valerie is an undercover informant, like me. She works for the same unit as Aurora and me.”

Fane’s hand fell from my face. “Val, too?” He took a step back and ran his hand through the blond tuff of hair on top of his head. “Boy, do I know how to pick them.”

“They picked you,” I said. “Well, Valerie anyway. Aurora didn’t know you were a vampire until I told her.” Actually, I thought deep down she knew before then but didn’t want to admit it to herself. Denial could sound pretty good when it came in the form of a dark hunk of a man.

“I knew it,” Fane said. “You’re all vampires, just like me. I had my suspicions with Aurora, but now that I know Valerie is part of your operation it’s confirmed.” He nodded at me. “That means you are, too.”

I shook my head. “I’d know if I was undead.”

Fane raised a brow. “Ever experienced any blood cravings?”

"No," I answered immediately. Watching Aurora drink blood after her kidnapping had actually grossed me out.

Fane grinned. "Ever tried blood?"

"No," I said a little slower. "But that doesn't prove anything. Why are you so convinced that Valerie is a vampire based on the taste of her blood? Maybe some people taste different. We all have unique smells and physical attributes. Why couldn't blood be the same way?"

"Because I've tasted vampires before and they all taste the same—not human."

"But how many vampires have you tasted?"

"Enough."

I shook my head. "It's not possible."

"There's only one way to find out. Sit on the bed."

"What? Why?" I knew exactly why, but this whole scenario had me all confused and riled up.

"Noel," Fane said firmly. "Sit on the bed."

Our eyes locked one last time before I turned and walked over to the bed. I sat on the edge, folded my hands in my lap, laced my fingers together, and squeezed as though praying for something. But what? My humanity? Eternal life?

I was so wrapped up in my thoughts that I didn't see Fane join me on the bed. The mattress dipped with his weight as he took a seat beside me. Shallow breaths breezed in and out of my half-closed lips. I felt like I was at the gynecologist's or on a first date. I couldn't decide which, but either way it was nerve-racking and awkward as hell.

My eyes remained open. It didn't seem like the appropriate occasion for closing them. I didn't tilt my head, either. Fane slipped my shirt down my shoulder slightly. I could see him searching my skin for a vein from the corner of my eye.

His hands gripped me suddenly, and I was certain he'd found his mark. I sucked in a breath and waited.

This was so different than all the pervious times I'd been inside this room. Nothing erotic or enticing about it. My fate lay on the tip of Fane's tongue.

His bite was delicate. Gentle. It was nice not to be ripped into, which happened more often than I cared to count.

Fane's grip tightened as he sucked my skin between his lips as though extracting venom from a snakebite. I'd nearly forgotten he hadn't had blood since his second breakup with Valerie. Hopefully he didn't get too carried away. Not that I'd protest. Blood was the least I could offer him after everything he'd done for me.

But I wanted answers. I wanted them now!

I was about to ask the million dollar question when, out of the blue, the door of the October room flew open. My first thought jumped to Gavin. He'd

finally come to stop Fane from biting me. But it wasn't Gavin standing in the doorframe looking like he'd witnessed the most grotesque sight humanly possible.

It was Aurora.

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13
Forever

It made no sense. How could Aurora appear at the worst possible moment? For a second, I nearly convinced myself I'd somehow ended up in the middle of a nightmare, and this was the part where I'd wake up and go, "Wow. That was seriously screwed up."

But Aurora didn't fade away, and neither did Fane. He'd pulled away from me and was staring at Aurora. I expected him to say something, anything. I waited. We all waited.

A brief flash of hurt filled Aurora's eyes before they turned into daggers, pointed at both Fane and me. She turned to leave.

"Aurora!" I called desperately. "It's not what you think!"

She didn't answer or stick around for more than a second before storming away.

"Aurora!" I called again, leaping to my feet.

Fane caught my arm and pulled me gently back. I stared at the open door, feeling like the absolute worst friend in the entire world.

"Noel, you've got bigger problems."

I turned my head slowly. For about thirty seconds, I'd forgotten why we were here.

I stared into Fane's eyes. "I'm dead, aren't I?"

One by one, Fane's fingers released my arm. "You are very much alive, Noel. Forever."

"Forever," I repeated. Tingles of pleasure raced up my spine. Me. Noel Harper. Vampire. I'd been given the gift of everlasting life. One of nature's specially selected.

Blood rushed through my veins, pumped to my heart in pure joy.

This was better than winning the lottery.

I didn't realize how big my smile was until Fane interrupted my thoughts to say, "You took that rather well."

"Should I be upset?" I felt different in a good way. Even my voice sounded more confident.

Fane studied my face. "Most people are, to some degree. Even if they're happy about it, there's the initial shock. You seem pretty calm. Should that worry me?"

"Why? Do you think I'll start killing people?"

Fane raised a brow.

"This doesn't change anything." I considered that a moment and laughed. "Okay, it changes everything, but I'm still me, and I still believe in the same principles of right and wrong. Killing people is always wrong, no matter who or what a person is. I need to have a serious chat with my boss, though. I can't

believe he didn't tell any of us."

Fane shook his head. "I wouldn't advise that."

"Why not?"

"Noel, think about it. Why didn't your boss tell any of you that you were vampires?"

I chewed on my lip, unable to answer that one off the bat. Why didn't Melcher just come out and say we were undead? He hated vampires. His entire mission in life was to rid the world of them. Why would he create more?

I blinked several times. "I don't know."

"Exactly." Fane straightened. "And how can you know that he doesn't plan to eliminate you once you find out?"

"Why create us in the first place if he only plans to kill us later?"

Fane raised a brow. "Later is the key word. For now you're at his disposal to do his bidding. He probably waits as long as he can before you and the people you know begin to notice you're not aging."

A tremor ran down my spine. That couldn't be correct, could it? Maybe Melcher gave us the option to carry out our duties forever, passing us on from agent to agent after he and the leaders after him aged. But again, why not mention that from the beginning? Why not inform recruits at orientation or even boot camp?

"Maybe he was concerned we'd hesitate to carry out our duties if we were killing our own kind." Now there was a moral dilemma. It certainly would make me think twice, which showed that maybe Melcher really did know what he was doing.

Then again, there was still the question of what he did when hunters or informants found out or, if they didn't put it together themselves, how he chose to inform them when the time came.

"Maybe you're right to hold back on telling my boss, but I have to tell Aurora."

Fane stiffened. "Aurora can't know."

"How can I not tell her? This is huge!" Fane couldn't be serious.

"She'll flip out if you tell her."

I gestured furiously towards the door. "She already has flipped out! How am I supposed to explain what happened in here if I don't tell her?"

"You can't. Not yet. Not until we figure out what's going on. Can you guarantee she won't rush off to that boss of yours and demand answers?"

I pressed my lips into a firm line, thinking. Yeah, Aurora was bullheaded like that. She'd already done it once with her blood cravings. Melcher was already suspicious of her, enough to ask me of all people to watch her for odd behavior.

It all suddenly made sense. Melcher wanted to know if Aurora starting turning, so to speak—acting on vampire tendencies. He wanted to know if she somehow figured it out. What would he do with her then?

No matter what Aurora thought of me, I had to keep her safe.

"She's going to hate me," I said.

Fane's lips stretched into a grim line across his face. "She'll hate me even more, but at least she'll be safe." He walked slowly to the door. "We shouldn't be talking about this here."

I nodded and followed Fane out of the October room. He stopped at the top of the spiral staircase and inclined his head for me to go down first. The living room got closer with each step I took. I'd spent so many evenings watching vampires from this room, envying them even, and I'd been one of them all along.

I looked for Gavin in the crowd. Part of me wanted to grab him and shake him and tell him we could be together forever if only he'd love me. Thanks for that, Fane, putting the delusion of love back in my head.

Another part of me wanted to throw it in his face. I didn't need Gavin to turn me. I was Noel freakin' Harper. I could turn myself.

But Gavin wasn't anywhere to be seen. Maybe Valerie had her claws in him. Definitely didn't want to be around Evil Red when she found out she was not only a tramp, but a vamp.

When we passed Marcus at the lip of the living room, I couldn't help asking, "Have you seen Aurora?"

Marcus looked from me to Fane and then at the fresh bite mark on my shoulder.

"Not since she arrived, but I take it she's seen you."

I couldn't help shooting Fane a guilty look.

Marcus leaned into Fane with an easy smile on his lips. "The trick is not getting caught, Francesco."

Fane squared his shoulders and said, "We're just on our way out. Catch you next time, Marcus."

Marcus winked at me. "Congratulations, Joyeux Noel. That one's quite the catch."

It wouldn't accomplish anything to deny Marcus's assumption of Fane and me. While I gave Marcus a quick kiss on the cheek, Fane dug our coats out from under the pileup in the entryway.

"Does this mean I need to drink blood?" I asked Fane as soon as we were inside his car.

The engine sputtered and choked before revving to life. Fane took it out of park. A grin spread across his face. "I was wondering how long until you asked that. Turns out it's your first question. Maybe I should worry."

"Hey, buddy, I'm the vamp police here," I teased, pointing a finger at him. "I'm the one who keeps everyone in line."

I felt giddy and good. Lighthearted. Like this was my destiny all along.

"You do need blood from time to time to stay... healthy," Fane said. "Don't forget that you're also sick, and you're never getting better."

"I know about the symptoms."

"You've been told about them," Fane corrected me. "But you haven't experienced any."

I shrugged. "Maybe I'm immune."

Fane chuckled softly. I could almost hear his thoughts. Noel, you naïve newbie, you have no idea.

There was a steep hill at the end of Marcus's neighborhood. Fane shoved his foot on the gas pedal. Flooring a car that weighed as much as a tank was quite the spectacle. The engine squealed in protest before chugging slowly up the hill. We made it to the top and turned onto the main road.

Once we were on flat ground, Fane said, "Maybe you haven't noticed because you haven't been paying attention. The mind is an amazing thing. It can make you think you taste food or feel cold. The mind can make you believe you're still aging, still human, stretching the bounds of logic until they reach the breaking point."

"But I do taste food."

Fane shot me a sideways grin. "It's in your head," he said, tapping his own.

"I have noticed the cold doesn't bother me too much. I mean, it never really did before, but I've been feeling especially immune to it. It's like you said, my brain is trying to tell me I should be cold. I'm aware of the temperature dropping, but I'm not really cold." I took a deep breath. "Am I going to be okay?"

"You'll be fine," Fane said. "Just don't tell your boss. You say you gather information for him. Now you need to gather information on him."

"How am I supposed to do that?"

"Act normal. Keep your eyes and ears open."

"He asked me to keep an eye on Aurora, you know?"

Fane gave me a quick, hard stare.

"Wants me to report any suspicious behavior," I continued. "That place I'm moving into next week... it's for both of us. Aurora and me. My boss expects me to keep tabs on her. I guess now I see why." Melcher wanted to know if Aurora ever figured out her blood cravings were due to the fact she was a vampire. Well, the joke was on him because I knew while Aurora was in the dark.

Fane held the steering wheel in a death grip, forcing the car through a yellow light. We didn't clear the intersection before it turned red, but the streets were nearly deserted after eleven.

"Do you think Aurora's in danger?" I asked.

"Not if you keep your mouth shut," Fane said.

After Fane pulled up to his place and parked, we both got out and slammed our doors.

"Of course I'm not going to report her, but I have to tell her what happened tonight. I know it's risky, but I'm the one who's going to have to live with her. How am I supposed to do that when she thinks you sucked me

for pleasure?"

Fane looked around the silent neighborhood and headed inside. I followed quickly.

Joss took one look at our faces as we walked in and raised two brows. With my bedding on the couch, he'd taken the armchair, cup of tea in one hand, book in the other, which he lowered now.

"What's going on?"

"She's a vampire." Fane gave me a pointed look.

"I didn't know," I said quickly.

Joss set his book in his lap, closed it, and stared at me like he'd never seen a vampire before.

He should try looking in a mirror.

Could I still do that? Had my brain been tricking me into believing I saw a reflection?

"They're all vampires," Fane said to Joss. "Noel, Aurora, Valerie; everyone who works for that extermination unit, but they don't even know it. I'd like to meet the man in charge. He sounds like a real piece of work."

I shook my head. "I know you think Aurora can't handle the truth, but she's going to find out eventually. I have to tell her now."

"No."

That one word was the harshest sound I'd ever heard Fane make. I glared at him, prepared to inform him that Aurora was my friend, too, and she deserved to know the truth. I'd want to know. If the situation was reversed and I found out Aurora had been keeping that from me, I'd be seriously pissed.

And living together wasn't going to be any picnic if she thought the worst of what happened tonight. The hurt look in her eyes haunted me. Clearing this thing up as soon as possible was the best answer.

Fane leaned forward. "We already went over this. You never know how someone's going to react to this sort of thing. Not everyone takes it as well as you. Most people panic or immediately go off and do some really stupid things. Some fall into a deep depression." He glanced at Joss. "How do you think Aurora would take it?"

I chewed on my lower lip. I couldn't imagine her taking it well. She'd sorta freaked out after initiation: had sex with a complete loser; beat up a boy at school; got suspended; macked on the first bad boy she could get her lips on, who also happened to be a vampire; and, to top it all off, gotten abducted from one of Marcus's parties.

Once again, Fane had a point. It was probably wise to keep Aurora in the dark for as long as possible. She'd hate me, but I'd have to deal with it. I'd have to be a bad friend to be a good one. I sighed in resignation.

"What about Valerie?"

"Valerie especially needs to be kept in the dark." Fane glanced at Joss with a slight smile. "That one would probably go on a killing spree if she

found out."

"Agreed," I said immediately.

Joss set his book aside and rose from the armchair. "I'll make you a cup of tea."

Fane rolled his eyes. "Maybe she wants her first taste of blood."

"Fane," Joss said firmly.

The tone of his voice must have startled Fane as much as me. Fane waved his hand. "Fine, go make her tea."

"I'm sorry it has to be this way," Fane said after Joss walked over to the kitchen. "You're going to want to tell her every time you see her, but you have to be strong."

I nodded. "I can do that." I took a breath. "There's something you should know. The reason Aurora broke up with you is because Valerie threatened to report you to our boss if she didn't."

Now that the cat was out of the bag, Fane might as well know. If he and Aurora were ever to have any future chance at love, they would have to start telling each other the truth.

Fane didn't say anything. He didn't need to. Now he knew, and that's all that mattered. I understood the importance of protecting Aurora while I tried to uncover Melcher's intentions, but someday soon one of us would need to tell her the truth.

Fane's shoulders relaxed. "I want you to know I will always be a friend to you, now more than ever. If you ever have any questions, you call me. If you ever need help, call me. Okay?"

"Yeah," I said nodding again. "Yeah. Thanks, Fane."

His lips twitched. "You've been through the meat grinder this week."

Yeah, I really had.

"I hope things get back to normal once you move into your new place."

Nothing would ever be normal again. Thank God. Normal was for humans, and I wasn't human.

"Do you want me to come with you to pick up your things?"

I gave Fane a blank look.

"The stuff your dad took. I can accompany you to your house to gather everything he took and help you move it to your new place."

Pick up my stuff?

That wardrobe belonged to a pathetic little Goth girl. A vampire groupie.

I was no groupie. I was the star attraction.

I lifted my chin. "Let Clive keep those rags. I'll get new clothes."

Better clothes.

It was a new day, and I was ready to move onto bigger and better.

No more standing on the sidelines. No more blending into the background. No more being a snowflake in a blizzard.

The world was my oyster, and it was my time to shine.

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SUMMARY

Aurora returns from boot camp to a new assignment, an unwelcome roommate, and the increasingly amorous attentions of a certain vampire hunter.

College is starting, and so is Aurora's undercover work at a network of swanky parties known as "Tastings" for high rolling vampires who like their blood laced with fine wine. But Aurora's not the only one on the prowl. An underground investigation is under way to find out who killed one of Anchorage's most prominent vampires . . . and Aurora is a prime suspect.

Book 3 of 6

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1
Fifteen Minutes

Tonight I had to kill a vampire.

I had yet to hear the details, but once I passed this final field test I could leave boot camp and go home.

Jones, one of the female drill sergeants, entered the mess hall shortly after dinner. Five of us sat around a table playing "Go Fish" with a deck of cards. I had three sevens and I knew exactly who had the fourth because she'd asked Amber for it and was told to "Go fish."

"Sky," Sergeant Jones called in her megaphone voice.

Now? Really? I looked at her over my hand of cards.

"It's time to get ready."

The ladies at my table pounded the surface in unison. Amber whistled. The women playing dominoes at the next table joined in the ruckus, banging their table with their fists.

"Stake that sucker, Sky!" someone yelled through the din.

"All right, that's enough," Jones said. "Sky, come with me."

I set my cards face down.

"Hey, Sky," Donna called from across the table. "Catch a big one."

Easy for her to say. She'd killed a vampire yesterday and had only to pass the time before going home next week. I did have an advantage over everyone in our group, though. They had only killed one vampire in a locked room during initiation, whereas I had killed four out in the real world. Marcus really ought to count as ten, but who was keeping track?

Donna mimicked flinging a fishing rod across the table, reeling it back in with gusto. The girls tittered.

I blew them a kiss before following Jones out. The mess hall wasn't big. There were between fifteen and twenty of us girls at any given time, which meant lots of one-on-one with the sergeants and instructors.

Jones supervised our warm-ups in addition to random inspections inside our sleeping quarters. She walked me there now.

"Your clothing for this operation has been laid out on top of your bed," she said at the door.

The barracks felt more like one long hallway than a room. Florescent lights hummed above the dingy laminate floor and two rows of metal-framed beds on either side. The hall was empty save for two newbie recruits sitting on top of their beds, textbooks open, cramming for written exams.

They had beds on opposite sides of the hall, closest to the double-doors that remained open until lights out at eight o'clock.

Jones stopped in the doorway.

"Be ready in ten," she said.

The two recruits looked up briefly before sticking their noses back in their books.

I approached my bed at the end of the hall.

I'd gone six whole months without shedding blood or being bitten. Boot camp was no picnic, but it had been a necessary respite from my old life even when it felt like it would break me.

Now I had one final test before I could go home. Obviously I couldn't carry out an assignment in army greens, but the outfit waiting on top of the bedspread stopped me in my tracks. Jones had done her best to fold a skimpy pink halter top and denim mini skirt. A pair of black stilettos crowned the thin pile. The halter top looked obnoxious compared to the olive green cotton T-shirt I'd grown accustomed to wearing day in and day out. I took it they weren't sending me to the suburbs. This outfit screamed club or worse… escort.

I unlaced my boots and dressed quickly. I needed all the extra time I could spare to practice walking in heels. Before putting the stilettos on, I eyed the shoes and wondered if my assignment would involve stabbing a vamp to death with the heel.

God, I hoped not.

After folding my pants and T-shirt, I set them neatly inside my locker, propped against the wall beside my bed.

I took my first tentative step, followed by the next, trying not to wobble past the rows of single beds. Five steps in, I concluded that walking in high heels belonged on the long list of physical tortures I planned to avoid at all costs in the near future.

So this was what it was like to walk on stilts. I had to remind myself I was getting ready for a mission, not a circus act.

I attempted to glide gracefully across the room, but the floor threatened to connect with my ass every time my heel landed on the ground.

How in the world did my instructors expect me to kill a vampire while wearing five-inch stilettos without first breaking my neck?

I wouldn't know the assassination details until the last minute. Donna said Sergeant Hansen gave her an icepick right before he instructed her to take out a vamp operating an ice cream truck in the suburbs of Portland.

I'd come to boot camp willingly, but now I wanted out. My first semester of college started in just over a week, and I needed to move into the house Agent Melcher had secured near campus. I wanted my privacy and freedom back, to say nothing of the stifling heat I'd suffered through all summer.

Melcher had sent me to the high desert. If this was his way of getting me to appreciate the Far North, it was working. I felt like I couldn't breathe in this inferno. And forget about sleeping. People wondered how we slept with the continual light all summer long in Alaska. It was called tinfoil! But how did people sleep in over ninety degree temperatures? Air-conditioning, I

guess, but no, not at boot camp. No, sir. Let the recruits suffer. It built character.

At least I didn't have to worry about a draft in this mini skirt.

It was bone cold when I first arrived at the end of February. My camp tenure had been twice as long as normal recruits. Melcher made special arrangements to get me out of town after killing Marcus, one of Anchorage's most prominent vampires.

Jones recommended I graduate with the summer recruits. Until that time, I'd practiced drills with a handful of informants and assassins-in-training who came and went throughout the spring.

That said, I ought to be double prepared to do whatever my instructors had planned for me… just so long as I didn't fall down face-first.

The sharp tips on the stilettos clicked as they stabbed the ground on my practice circuit across the hall.

"You look nice," the new recruit with Shirley Temple curls said from her bed by the doors.

I flipped my long black hair over my shoulder. "Thanks," I said in my most self-assured voice.

Everything I'd done at boot camp was to prepare me for tonight, and if I couldn't act confident in front of a rookie, I wasn't ready to take on my final assignment.

"I wonder what kind of weapon they'll give you," the girl mused.

I straightened my shoulders. "Maybe they won't give me any weapon at all. Maybe I'll have to take the vamp out with my bare hands."

The girl's eyes widened. She tugged on a curl.

I straightened my spine, paying attention to my weight distribution as I shifted on my feet. "I don't care how they want me to kill him. He's as good as dead."

The girl gave an enthused nod.

Oh god, they wouldn't ask me to kill a vamp with my bare hands, would they?

The tempo of my heels started anew as I made another go down the narrow space between beds.

A loud sigh came from the second recruit.

"I don't know why I'm supposed to care about all these different kinds of vampires and their diseases," she said, addressing her curly-haired comrade on the bed across the hall. "In the end, aren't we going to kill them all anyway? What does it matter if they've got rabies or tuberculosis or whatever medieval disease they're carrying?" She placed a finger inside her Vampire Forensics textbook, flipped through to the end and back to her spot with a groan.

I stopped at the foot of her bed. "I think it's fascinating."

The girl squinted at me right before lifting her book and reading aloud.

"Porphyria had its day before giving way to pellagra. First recognized in

1735, pellagra is a result of a niacin and tryptophan deficiency, typically a result of a diet dependent on corn or maize. These crops were planted widely across southern and eastern Europe, and that's where pellagra became pandemic." She lowered her book and frowned. "How are corn crops fascinating?"

My lips twisted into a smile. "Turn to page sixty-six."

The recruits in my class actually referred to it as page "sexty-sex." Hey, we had to get our kicks somehow out here in the bone-dry desert at a women-only camp.

The curly haired girl who had spoken to me first flipped to it on cue. "Got it! Page sixty-six." With spark like that, she might just make it through boot camp. "Want me to read something?"

"Yeah," I said. "Paragraph three."

Her chest rose as she readied herself to read aloud.

"Rabies may supply an explanation for a vampire's nocturnal habits," she began eagerly before pausing. "And those of their erotic pursuits."

I fought back a laugh, knowing what came next.

"Go on," I said.

The girl sat up straighter. She was determined. I'd give her that.

"This is because the disease affects the part of the brain that regulates sleep cycles and the sex drive, keeping the afflicted up the entire night. Some reports conclude that rabies vampires have intercourse up to thirty times per night."

The girls exchanged glances.

"That's messed up," the girl who'd complained earlier said. Maybe, but she was suddenly flipping through her textbook with a lot more enthusiasm.

"Be glad you're not an informant," I said. "Or that could be you spending quality time with a rabid vampire thirty times a night depending on your assignment."

The girl stopped turning pages and swallowed. "I am an informant."

"Oh," I said. "Sucks to be you."

I didn't have much love in my heart for informants. Not after working with Noel and Valerie. As far as I could tell, they enjoyed all the sucking and sleeping around. It wasn't like they had to worry about pregnancy or disease. None of us did: hunters, informants, and vampires alike. We couldn't procreate. We were barren. Sterile. Individually diseased, courtesy of the agency.

We couldn't spread our illness thanks to the government's controlled virus cocktail created especially for AB positive and negative recruits. It worked similar to the way a disease activated and remained contained inside a vampire's immune system. Vampires weren't contagious. Most didn't mind an affliction that promised everlasting life.

I'd only just learned I was infertile at camp. Melcher failed to mention it during orientation. I wondered what else he'd failed to mention.

I never trusted him. Once I found out he knowingly employed a vampire, I was downright suspicious, but getting the truth out of Melcher would take more than high kicks and kung fu moves.

Heavy footsteps interrupted my thoughts as Sergeant Jones entered the dormitory. Her combat boots looked a heck of a lot more comfortable than the spikes I had to wear. She stopped near the double-doors. "Sky, Sergeant Hansen is ready for you."

Maybe I wasn't ready for him. Did they ever think about that?

Probably not.

All of my bravado instantly abandoned ship, leaving me to sink or swim on my own. I lifted my chin for show and headed for the door. Surprisingly, the click of the heels managed to boost my confidence a fraction.

"Good luck," the cheerier of my dorm mates called after me. That one had to be a hunter.

I stopped and turned. "You, too. Don't study too hard. And remember to get plenty of shut-eye."

The girl chuckled, earning her a stern look from Jones. She turned to me. "Sergeant Hansen is waiting."

Yeah, yeah. I was walking as fast as I could on mini stilts. Good thing there was no ice in the desert. I'd slip and break my neck in five seconds flat. All I had to worry about now was not getting the shiny black heels dusty.

Damn desert.

After tonight, I'd be headed home and wouldn't look back. Boot camp had served its purpose. It had gotten me away from the mess I'd made at the palace. It had saved me from having to see or speak to either Noel or Fane after they ripped my heart apart and destroyed any trust I'd ever felt for either of them by hooking up right under my nose. And it had prepared me to deal with Jared—the reason I was here to begin with. The reason for everything I'd gone through since my accident. All of it! Everything that was wrong with my life. My dad leaving. My dreams of attending Notre Dame crumbling to dust. Losing my virginity to that asshat, Scott Stevens. Transferring high schools in the middle of senior year. Not even getting to attend graduation!

If Jared hadn't run me down on the road, I wouldn't have needed a transfusion in order to live. I wouldn't have been recruited. I wouldn't have to kill. And most importantly, I wouldn't have ever lost my heart to that rat bastard vampire, Fane Donado.

I would have gone on thinking he was King of the Freaks, a loser in a black trench coat with terrible hair.

I'd pushed Noel and Fane out of my head, but now that my time at camp was ending, they were shoving their way back inside my brain.

At least I had a renewed sense of disgust for vampires. It helped on mission.

I followed Jones outside to a waiting SUV. I had to hold both arms out to balance myself over the uneven ground and use my upper body strength to

pull myself into the back seat. Sergeant Hansen was buckled into the seat beside me. He had on a beige pair of pants and a matching military-style jacket that blended into the landscape, turning him into a commanding chameleon with a crew cut.

Once I was inside, the vehicle drove forward.

This was it. All I had to do was kill a vampire, and I could go home. It's not like I hadn't done this before.

"Congratulations on making it to your final assignment," Sergeant Hansen said in his gravelly voice. "Your target goes by the name of Jeremy Phillips. Here are several photographs taken of him for you to familiarize yourself with on the drive."

Hansen handed over three snapshots. From the photos, I saw that the vamp was Caucasian, approximately twenty-two, had brown-eyes and brown hair that curled at the edges. In one of the photos, he was wearing a tank top that showed off his muscled arms. He could probably break my bones with his bare hands. Just great. At least he had a narrow frame.

Once I'd shuffled through the pictures a few times and set them on my lap, Hansen resumed speaking.

"Tonight Jeremy is hosting a large house party. A young woman died at the last house party he threw, two more before that."

Hansen reached into his coat pocket. He flattened his palm, presenting me with a tightly wound phone cord. My heart dropped as though I were in free fall.

"Take it," Hansen said.

There was no other option. I took the cord.

"After you get Jeremy alone and he has bitten you, you will need to strangle him with this cord."

I clenched and relaxed my fist around the cord, studying the thin red indents it made in my skin.

"This will be a timed exercise," Hansen continued.

I loved how he called it an exercise rather than what it really was—an assassination.

"You have fifteen minutes to complete your mission. Every minute after fifteen will add an extra day to your training, and you will have to perform another field test."

"What if I finish early?" I asked. "Do I get to leave an extra day for every minute before fifteen?"

Hansen locked eyes with me. "Just concentrate on getting the job done in fifteen minutes."

"Won't it look weird for me to wander in uninvited?"

Walking into a house party unannounced made me about as nervous as the mission at hand. What was I supposed to do? Pretend that a friend of a friend had invited me?

"No one will notice," Hansen said. "His house is near a community

college and a lot of kids end up wandering over."

"What city is this in?"

"Bend."

Bend, Oregon. Not like driving from Anchorage to Fairbanks, but still a good couple hours in the car with Hansen and our driver. Plenty of time to stress over my assignment.

I loosened the phone cord and wound the ends around each of my palms, pulling it taut. I'd stabbed vampires in the past, so I wasn't sure why strangulation seemed more gruesome. Perhaps because stabbing, when done correctly, was swift—over and done with in a flash. Strangling a vampire meant pulling and choking him as he fought for breath until slumping back, lifeless, in my arms.

Eternal life wasn't the only characteristic that set vampires apart from humans, nor their need for blood. They couldn't get sick, which wasn't the most incredible super power, but must really save on doctor bills. They couldn't get anyone pregnant or find themselves in the family way. I supposed that came in handy, as well, considering their nocturnal habits and erotic pursuits.

But they could die, and there wasn't a special way to do it. An ax, gun, knife, icepick—or any other pointy object—would do the trick… to say nothing of a phone cord.

Slowly, I wound the cord up and set it on my lap with the photos.

Light faded outside the SUV's tinted windows. Dust clouds billowed behind us as the vehicle's tires spun across the high desert floor. Once we hit pavement, everything inside felt louder: the thoughts inside my head, my heartbeat, even my throat when I swallowed.

There was no music and no conversation between Hansen or the driver.

Juniper trees flew by along the road.

I closed my eyes and envisioned spruce trees dusted in snow and tall, skinny willows with their white and black bark. As I breathed in and out, I tried to imagine the crisp, clean Alaskan air filling my lungs.

For six months, I'd trained physically and mentally. Now it was time to prepare myself emotionally for the kill.

I was glad Hansen told me about the girls who wound up dead. That always helped. Take one life to save many. It made the whole thing feel like a moral responsibility. But the thought still nagged at me that if Jared hadn't arranged my accident, I wouldn't be saddled with the burden to kill.

I should have let Valerie shoot him while he was unconscious in Sitka.

That was before I'd discovered Jared had been behind the wheel of the vehicle that hit me and, more than likely, the one responsible for Valerie's placement within the agency. It was before I knew he and Melcher were in cahoots together.

If Melcher knew Jared was a vampire, what else did he know? Did he know that Jared had gone out of his way to harm Valerie and me in the

interest of the agency?

Nothing would surprise me at this point, and I couldn't imagine Jared doing all this behind Melcher's back.

Somehow, I needed to find out how much Melcher knew without coming right out and asking. He ran the show, after all, which made him even more dangerous than Jared.

And to find out, I needed to return home.

A little after eleven o'clock, we rolled into Bend. Our driver got off the highway at the community college exit. There weren't any high rises. The city was comprised of cute little shops, restaurants, and neighborhoods. The streets looked clean and landscaped. Footpaths and bike lanes bisected the roadways.

We crossed a river, passing more neighborhood parks and juniper-lined streets. Farther up, we turned into one of the subdivisions. Now that we were on the right street, I didn't need an address to locate the party. All of the street parking was bumper-to-bumper in front of a two-story brown home with green trim.

Volcanic rock lined the driveway.

"This is the place," Hansen said.

I immediately sat up in my seat. "When do my fifteen minutes start?"

"The moment the front door closes behind you."

What if I left the front door open? Somehow, I didn't think Hansen would find that question clever.

"And when does the clock stop ticking?"

"When I see you come back through the door, after which Samuel here will confirm the kill and cause of death." Hansen glanced at the driver, who said nothing in response.

I really only had about ten minutes to kill this vamp, if that. Five minutes to make an entrance, locate Jeremy, and pull him aside somewhere private. I also needed time to make my way out of the house and out the front door.

The kill would have to be quick.

How long did it take to strangle a vampire?

At least they'd prepared us for all possible scenarios at boot camp, but it was one thing to strangle a practice dummy, another to go at it hands-on with a live target.

Hansen raised a brow. "Any questions?"

I uncrossed my legs. "Can I go in barefoot?"

"No."

"Well, then can I get an extra five minutes? These shoes on spikes are going to slow me down."

"Tough," Hansen said.

Jerk. What did wearing high heels have to do with killing a vampire? I

didn't need any extra handicaps tonight.

"Fine," I said, unbuckling the seatbelt. "But as soon as I'm finished they're coming off."

I set the photographs on the middle seat and stuffed as much of the telephone cord inside my fist as I could.

After opening the car door, I slid down, careful to land on my feet. With a quick smile I said, "See you in fifteen."

I shut the car door and headed up the driveway, which, for added torture, sloped to a steep incline. A gaggle of girls in front of me walked in without knocking, so I figured I'd do the same, but not before taking one final breath. Once I went through that door, the clock started ticking.

A watch would have been helpful… or distracting. Maybe I was better off without the hands of time flashing every second that passed.

Music pounded within.

Showtime.

At the door, I squared my shoulders, reached with my free hand, and let myself in.

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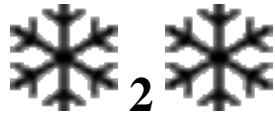

2
To Kill a Vampire

The music hit me like a scream in the face.

I could probably thank the solidarity and order of boot camp for the sudden culture shock I experienced walking into a loud room packed with teenage and twenty-something civilians.

It seemed like ages ago that I'd been around boys my own age.

Couples grinded against each other in the living room. Just about everyone held a drink of some sort in a bottle or plastic red cup. No one greeted or noticed me. No one except a jock in a football jersey leaning against the banister, sipping beer and checking out my bare legs.

"Hey, babe. My name's Cody."

I took two careful steps toward him.

"Have you seen Jeremy?"

There was no time for small talk, and I certainly didn't have time to go on a scavenger hunt of Find the Vampire.

"Over there by the keg," the guy said, sticking his chin out.

Following the direction of his eyes, I spotted Jeremy, a perfect match from the photos, standing with an arm hanging over a girl in white denim and a spaghetti strap tank top.

With steady steps, I walked over without stumbling. Looming deadlines could do that.

"Chug! Chug! Chug!" Jeremy's group chanted at a guy in a prison-orange polo guzzling beer from a bong held over his head.

Maybe I'd skip the parties when I started college at the University of Alaska Anchorage. This really wasn't my scene.

"Hello, Jeremy," I called out flirtatiously.

One of the boys issued a catcall.

"Uh-oh, Jeremy," another said, looking me up and down. "Who's this?"

Jeremy smirked, obviously getting an ego boost out of the attention.

He removed his arm from the girl. She glared venom at me, but didn't say a word. She looked cute, but her tight jeans and strappy sandals were no match for my mini skirt and stilettos. She ought to be thanking me for stepping in and saving her skinny hide.

"Can I talk to you upstairs?" I asked.

Jeremy folded his arms across his chest. When he looked at me, it wasn't as a boy ogling a girl, but a predator eying his prey.

He didn't like games. Well, neither did I.

"What makes you think I'm interested in talking?" he asked.

"What makes you think I'm interested in listening?" I returned in a saucy

voice.

That earned Jeremy a slap on the shoulder, but while the guys around us chuckled, Jeremy assessed me with narrow eyes. He glanced at the girl who'd been under his arm seconds ago. She'd stuck around despite my interruption.

Maybe he didn't like a woman with lip.

Panic gripped my heart. For the first time since entering the house, my legs threatened to wobble.

Jeremy smiled slowly. "I'll be right back. You," he said, addressing my breasts, "come with me."

Was it that hard to get a vamp to escort a half-naked, willing victim to a private room? Jeremy certainly took his sweet time leading me across the living room.

He didn't bother walking beside or anywhere near me, nor did he look back. If I weren't about to kill him, I might have experienced a moment of outrage.

"Yo, Jer. How's it going?" a guy with a shaved head called out as we passed.

"Billy boy! What's up?"

Seriously? Tick, tock. Got a schedule to follow.

The guys fist-bumped and proceeded to make chitchat, ignoring my presence behind them completely.

The back of Jeremy's neck called out from two feet away. I was tempted to strangle him on the spot.

Reaching forward, I gave his ass a nice firm pat, instead. It was a risk, one that grabbed Jeremy's attention. He turned and grinned at me, finally beginning to look excited.

Jeremy placed an open palmed hand on his friend's shoulder and said, "Good seeing you, man. Enjoy the party." To me he said, "Let's go."

Jeremy returned greetings three more times on the way to the staircase, but he didn't make any more stops. Walking over carpet in stilettos was about as reassuring as sand. The banister would have been helpful, but my nearest hand gripped the phone cord meant for Jeremy's neck. I didn't want to bring attention to the thing by switching it from one palm to the other, so I sucked it up and made it up the stairs, to the landing on the second floor without face-planting.

Jeremy led me down a hallway. We passed a closed door that barely blocked the sound of squeaking springs, screams, and a headboard banging against a wall. House party meets underage bar meets brothel. Charming.

At the end of the hall, Jeremy opened a door and motioned me inside.

Unlike the stairs and hallway, the room had a hardwood floor. Maybe "Jer" didn't fancy getting blood on his carpet. My oh-so-charming host closed and locked the door behind me. The space was roomy—though not lacking in furniture—including a full-sized oval mirror framed in wood and attached to a moveable stand.

It was hard to keep a straight face when a vampire owned the biggest free-standing mirror I'd ever seen. My lips twitched as I fought back the smile.

I caught my expression in the mirror and sobered up. I had to get down to business, and I had to do it now.

Thick black curtains covered the windows. A sick sense of déjà vu came over me. The last time I worked alone was when Dante left me with Ivo and Patrick during my first mission in Fairbanks. I'd gone off to Ivo's bedroom, and I'd killed him, but not before he tossed me around and bruised me up.

I could pass on the pre-kill beating. Jeremy needed to suck my blood so I could end his life without a struggle.

Speaking of the undead devil… I turned in time to catch Jeremy's sleazy smile. Guess he wasn't immune to my feminine charms after all.

"Who told you about me?"

He could only mean one thing by that. He'd made the correct assumption that I knew what he was.

"A friend," I answered.

Jeremy smirked. Apparently that was good enough for him.

"I'll suck you if you suck me." He looked down at his crotch.

My nose wrinkled. God, I missed Marcus' parties.

I inched toward him and bent my head to one side. "You first."

Jeremy made no movement toward me. I tried not to tap my stiletto heel on the hard floor.

"My house. My rules. Get on your knees."

Giving up all pretense of flirting, I full-on glared at the jerk. Guess things were going to have to get rough. But first, the stilettos had to go. I kicked them off. Not only did it give me better footing, but the action distracted Jeremy. He smiled slightly. Maybe he thought I was getting more comfortable before kneeling on the floor.

In his undead dreams.

I moved around him swiftly. The phone cord unraveled from my hand in spirals. Quick as a whip, I wrapped the loose ends around each wrist. My arms lifted above his head, in a forward rowing motion as though pulling an invisible hood over his face. There was no time to hesitate. I pulled back.

Jeremy let out a shocked breath followed by a weird slurping sound.

With the element of surprise in my favor, I pulled the cord around his neck tighter.

Expelling a grotesque gag, Jeremy took a step forward. I moved with him, keeping a death grip on the cord even as it bit into my palms.

Jeremy tried to shake me off by moving side to side while I attempted to follow his every gesture.

Reaching back, he slapped at my side. He probably meant to punch me, but couldn't quite manage it with my body molded against his back and his windpipe blocked off.

Suddenly, he stopped smacking me and pushed back with all his weight, which was considerable. Thank god I'd chucked the stilettos. He would have had me on my back in a heartbeat, then guess who'd be backed against the floor with an angry vampire's hands around her neck?

Not much of a multiple choice question. Answer: A—Aurora.

I held on as though my life depended on it. To allow Jeremy to break free would not only guarantee a fail, but worse, possible death. In other words, failure was not an option.

I crossed the wires and pulled as though tying a bow around a present.

The choking noises increased. The sound simultaneously filled me with sickness and encouragement.

Hurry up and die already!

Taking a slight step back, I stretched my elbows and pulled the wire taut. Jeremy's fingers flew to his neck, where he scratched at the wire. I pulled back harder.

Just when I thought the ordeal was almost over, Jeremy grabbed a clump of my hair and yanked.

Yelping, I nearly dropped the phone cord. It remained in my hands, but my grip loosened enough for Jeremy to gulp in a breath, push back, and slam me against the wall. Air left my lungs on impact. A quick taste of what I was inflicting was enough to get a grip on the cord and retighten the line even as Jeremy crushed me against the wall.

Jeremy rammed his back into me repeatedly. I couldn't pull on the cord as tightly when I was holding onto what felt like a bucking bronco on steroids.

Why couldn't he have sucked my blood?

Wishing wouldn't make it happen.

Jeremy threw his shoulder blades into the next wave of assaults. My head slammed back against the wall.

"Ow!" I cried.

This had to stop.

I tried to knee Jeremy in the groin, but access wasn't ideal from the rear. My kneecap ended up bouncing off his butt.

This was ridiculous. I wasn't letting some sleazy, murderous vampire make me miss my first day of college.

I screamed and yanked back the two ends of the cord. A definitive "snap" followed. Unfortunately it wasn't Jeremy's neck.

The cord broke in two.

Well, crap.

Jeremy gasped, taking in large gulps of air, his body pitching forward.

Boot camp had taught me to expect the unexpected. Always have a Plan B, C, and D.

It sounded good in theory.

At the moment I had a couple seconds before Jeremy regained his breath enough to come after me.

I still had two pieces of phone cord. Although considerably shorter—like, by half—either piece would still stretch across Jeremy's neck. I dropped the shortest of the two halves. There was barely room to wrap the cord once around each of my palms. I'd just have to hope I had enough for Jeremy's neck.

I slipped the cord around his neck when he doubled over, hacking. The coughing stopped and gagging resumed.

Killing a vampire was never easy and, unfortunately, didn't get any easier with practice. I didn't care how much the instructors made us run or how many obstacles and scenarios they put us through. Murder didn't come naturally. At least not to me.

Jeremy didn't fight back as hard the second round. There wasn't enough cord left to cross wires. I held my fists together just behind his neck, not letting up for an instant.

This isn't by choice. You're the one killing guests. Couldn't just suck their blood and send them home. You brought this on yourself.

I'd found myself having more and more conversations in my head since starting boot camp. Definitely time to get back out into the real world.

It took me a moment to notice that Jeremy had stopped struggling. In the next instant, he fell forward, me with him. I landed on his back with an "umph."

Even as Jeremy lay on the floor motionless, I kept hold of the line just in case.

Sitting in silence until I couldn't take the stress any longer, I released one end of the cord and checked Jeremy's wrist for a pulse. Nothing.

Next I put my hand over his mouth to check for breath. If he bit me, it was his funeral.

Nothing there, either.

Death confirmed, I leapt to my feet. I scooped up the second phone line and the stilettos before bolting from the bedroom, shutting the door behind me. I raced down the hall, down the stairs, and across the living room, not caring who I bumped along the way, until I reached the front door and threw it open.

Once I reached the porch, I walked the rest of the way barefoot to the SUV waiting across the street.

I yanked open the door and jumped inside.

"How was my time?" I asked.

"Twelve minutes, twenty-three seconds," Hansen answered.

Gee, I could have grabbed a wine cooler on my way out.

The driver, Samuel, turned around and looked at me for the first time. His light brown crew cut and green eyes looked more Ken doll than GI Joe.

"Where's the body?" he asked.

"Upstairs at the end of the hall, door on the left."

Samuel got out of the car, leaving it running as he crossed the street with

purposeful strides.

I wanted Sam's job. Confirm the kill rather than perform it.

I dropped the two pieces of cord and stilettos on the floor beside my feet.

"Great, so I'm done now," I remarked, relief washing over me.

"We'll find out in a moment," Hansen said.

Couldn't just say "congratulations," could he?

I wasn't exactly in the mood for high-fives, anyway. I just wanted to go home. I wanted to see my mom and grandma again. I wanted to talk and laugh with Dante face-to-face. Because of Dante, I'd remained sane during the first few brutal weeks at camp. He texted me every day. He kept me laughing and my spirits high.

I'd never had a friend like him before; someone who loved me unconditionally.

My only concern was that he wanted more, and I wasn't sure if I could give him that.

Dante was Dante. A great friend. My pal. My bud.

But his texts suggested otherwise. I still had our first exchange memorized.

Dante: Where are you?
Me: Classified.
Dante: How about a hint?
Me: Can't.
Dante: You're killing me, Sky.
Me: I'm the one at boot camp.
Dante: Try celibacy.
Me: Striking out with all the ladies?
Dante: Waiting for you.
Me: You think that's going to help you score or something?
Dante: I'm counting on it.

I'd written it off as typical Dante, cheering me up during my first week of camp. I fully expected him to move on and find a more willing, not to mention available, woman to hit on.

But the texts kept coming. And he kept mentioning waiting for me. No pressure or anything.

I glanced at the digital clock on the dash. Samuel had been gone a full ten minutes. Not that he had a deadline, like that was fair.

Funny how the time had flown by during the kill and now wobbled along, like me in heels, as we waited in the car.

I sighed. "What's taking him so long? It's not like he has to kill a vampire."

Hansen, in an upright "I never relax" position, gave me a quick look.

"Samuel is removing any evidence from the room."

“I already did that for him,” I said, pointing my nose at the cord and shoes at my feet.

Hansen raised an unimpressed brow. “None of your skin got under his nails? You didn’t shed a single hair?”

Oops. He had to have removed several strands when he grabbed a fistful. Maybe I wasn’t as thorough as I thought. I suppose Samuel had to earn his keep somehow.

Samuel returned several minutes later. “Target dead by strangulation.”

Like I couldn’t have told them that.

“Room clear.”

With that, he buckled up and put the car into drive.

Hansen turned to me and smiled. “Congratulations, Agent Sky. You’re going home.”

My first act as a free citizen was to ditch the army greens in favor of a sundress. For the first time in my life I had a killer tan and it would be a crime not to show it off.

I didn’t have any cash to purchase snacks at the airport. As soon as the flight attendant handed me a plastic cup filled with cranberry juice, I attacked the bag of pretzels that accompanied the beverage. I spent the flight reading over texts, starting with the oldest. One of the first texts I’d received after leaving for boot camp came from Noel.

Noel: Aurora, please answer my text. You have to let me explain.
Me: There’s nothing to explain.
Noel: We have to talk.
Me: Don’t text me again.

And the little bitch hadn’t, which told me what I’d known all along. There was nothing to explain. I’d seen her and Fane with my own eyes. He’d bit her, sucked her blood, and run his tongue over her pale skin. Maybe it had been a onetime thing. Maybe Melcher had told her to go after him. I didn’t care.

And Fane? What did I expect from a vampire?

I killed vampires. Fane was dead in my eyes. Not just undead, but ancient history. Nonexistent.

At least the thought of them together drove me extra hard at camp. I had all the fuel I needed to kick complete and total ass.

I’d heard from Valerie, as well.

Me: Are we on target?
Valerie: I’m back in Melcher’s good graces.
Me: How’d you pull that off?

Valerie: By getting an interview as one of Diederick's wine girls.

Me: Great. Don't drink too much.

Valerie: If I were you, I'd worry more about getting your ass in shape. We have a vampire to kill when you return.

Me: How could I forget?

Jared. That bastard motivated me to do well at camp even more than Noel and Fane. Every move he made served his own personal agenda. It wasn't enough that he'd taken away my entire life. He'd attempted to end it permanently in Sitka. I truly believed that. He'd terrorized Valerie and me, but we'd gotten away.

No doubt he'd come after us again unless we got to him first.

On this, Valerie and I were in perfect agreement. Neither of us would rest easy until he died. As much as Jared troubled me, it was nice not to be in this alone. With boot camp behind me, I felt more prepared than ever to take care of unfinished business.

Meanwhile, my mom had moved in with grandma and become an active member of society. She never once mentioned Dad.

Then there was Dante.

I reread our last set of texts.

Dante: You up?

Me: Yes.

Dante: I could really use a hand with something.

Me: You're sick.

Dante: Trouble sleeping?

Me: Obviously.

Dante: Thinking about me?

Me: Goodnight, Dante.

Dante: Wait.

Me: What?

Dante: I miss you.

Me: Well, I'm down to the last week.

Dante: Can't wait to see your new moves.

Me: Try anything funny, and I guarantee you will.

Dante: Is that a promise?

Me: Signing off!

Dante: Sign off while you can. You're coming home in another week. See you soon, Sky… real soon.

The phone suddenly felt like it could slip out my sweaty palm and into the aisle. It was one thing to joke around from afar, but with every passing minute, I got closer to home and seeing Dante face-to-face. He didn't strike me as the kind of guy who'd wait six months for a woman and not expect

something in return.

I'd just have to cross that bridge when I got to it and hope for the best on the other side.

I stretched one leg into the aisle once the drink cart had made its final pass through the cabin. I had on a pair of flip flops—no more stilettos, thank you very much!—and toned, tanned bare legs beneath my short sundress. I hadn't run six miles in the desert every morning for nothing.

The captain came on the intercom to announce our final decent into Anchorage and ask that all electronic devices be turned off. No more obsessing over texts. At least not for the next ten or so minutes until we landed.

The day before leaving, I'd texted my mom the flight number and arrival time. I offered to call when I landed, but she said not to worry, I'd have a ride.

As I approached the security point, after de-boarding, I wondered if my mom and grandma would be standing on the other side to greet me.

I half expected to collect my baggage alone and find Melcher's black sedan waiting in the pick-up lane. Couldn't even let a girl unpack before the debriefing. But as I neared the outer terminal, it wasn't my mom or Melcher waiting inside the terminal, but Dante.

I didn't have to wait for him to notice me. His eyes were on me immediately. I watched for his big, goofy grin to spread across his lips, but his stony expression held a severity over his features that stopped me in my tracks for half a second before I regained my footing.

I swallowed and walked past the security guard.

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3

Home Is Where the Heartthrob Is

At first, I thought Dante was mad at me. I had left without consulting him or saying good-bye. He never sounded upset in his text messages, so why give me grief now?

I couldn't believe he wouldn't have a smile for me or take a step forward as I approached.

He wasn't wearing a jacket, just a pair of snug jeans and a thin ribbed T-shirt that spread over his taut, toned abs. Dante looked tan even in winter, but summer had been especially kind to his skin, turning him into a bronzed stud of a man.

Maybe it was spending the last six months at an all-women's boot camp, but suddenly Dante looked like the Greek Titan god, Oceanus, surging from the high desert on shimmering waves.

The heels of my flip flops snapped against the floor as I walked up to him. Dante's eyes looked extra blue in his tan face.

Before I could say anything, he took my head in his hands and kissed me on the lips.

There was nothing playful about the movement of his lips, the tip of his tongue touching mine, teasing me with an all-out invasion if only I'd relent.

When I kissed Dante back, his grip tightened around my neck. I would have thought kissing my past mentor would be awkward, but it beat figuring out what to say after a six month absence.

As the kiss continued, it felt more natural, like instinct, like breathing.

Everything around us became a blur. Sound receded and took on a dreamlike quality that echoed inside my ears. Dante's chest pressed against mine. He felt as solid as a pillar, strong enough to hold me up no matter how much I leaned in.

We kissed and kissed. No tongues, other than touching tips now and then, just a raw, passionate mouth-to-mouth make-out in the terminal.

My entire body hummed with pleasure, as though my ribs were the strings on a violin vibrating under the skilled hands of a musician.

Dante planted feather-light kisses over me between rough, lip-blistering kisses.

I was beginning to think we were setting some kind of record for world's longest lip lock when Dante pulled back gently. His lips curved up. And there was the smile I'd been expecting. He slipped his hand into mine and entwined our fingers.

"Let's get your things," he said with a nod toward the escalators.

Dante gave my hand a slight tug. It took a moment for my legs to work,

but soon he led me toward the escalator and to the baggage carousel. Bags were already toppling out and circulating the luggage belt.

"Tell me when you see yours," Dante said, giving my hand a squeeze.

"There," I said when I saw my bag. "The black duffel."

Dante let go of my hand to grab the duffel bag. He slung it over his shoulder. "Anything else?"

"That's it."

Dante grinned. "Let's get out of here."

I walked beside him, suddenly shy and unsure of what to say.

"Your mom and grandma have been cooking all afternoon," Dante said. "They've got a special 'welcome home' dinner planned for you tonight."

"Is that why they sent you to pick me up?"

Dante stopped walking in the middle of the hallway. My feet slowed on cue. We were face-to-face, not even a foot away. My eyes dropped to his lips before I could stop myself. Dante grinned.

"I came because I couldn't wait a second longer." He leaned forward and kissed me on the lips with the same hunger as before. This one didn't last long before Dante took my hand in his and said, "Come on."

The brightly lit tunnel connecting baggage claim to the parking garage gave me a Twilight Zone sensation as I walked hand-in-hand with Dante.

Dinner with the family. Was Dante still pretending we were going out for my grandmother's benefit, or did he really think we were together?

I felt like I'd landed in some kind of alternate universe that came with an insta-boyfriend. Was this really the way it worked?

The closest I'd ever come to having a boyfriend turned out to be a vampire. Did that even count? It had been brief and ended in disaster.

I gripped Dante's hand firmly.

The glaring white hallway turned into dark gray concrete when we stepped through the sliding doors into the parking garage. A man in a navy business suit passed us, heading into the terminal. The garage was deserted, and although it was a bright end of summer day, the surrounding concrete and shadows gave me the chills.

I looked around for Dante's white Jeep, but didn't see it. He led me through the garage. We passed dozens of empty parking spots before I noticed the Jeep parked in the farthest corner.

I wanted to crack a joke about parking that far away, but I seemed to be tongue-tied at the moment.

Dante's fingers were warm. He rubbed my hand with his thumb a couple times in a caressing motion I found unnerving.

He released my hand once we reached the Jeep and loaded my duffel in back. The slam of the trunk echoed through the deserted garage. I felt it inside my chest. Hands now completely free, Dante turned to me.

I knew I was in trouble.

I stood trapped between Dante and his car. He stepped forward, pushing

me against the Jeep. His mouth was on mine before I had a chance to take a breath. This time his hands roamed freely, sliding down my torso, gripping me when they reached my waist, holding me steady as he pushed his pelvis into mine, revealing a rock-hard erection. I sucked in a breath. I never remembered closing my eyes, but even with them shut I swore I could see Dante's self-satisfied smile at my throaty reaction to his hard on.

My eyes fluttered open as he gyrated against me. The contrast between his body heat and the cool air drifting up my skirt had my body feverish one moment and shivering the next.

I had definitely been in the desert too long.

This was Dante. Goofy guy Dante: talks with his mouth full and makes immature innuendos. At the moment he was Dante: rock solid He-Man with fingers meant only for caressing every inch of my body.

Keeping one arm wrapped around my waist, Dante reached over with his free hand and opened the backdoor of the Jeep. He maneuvered me through the door, against the back bench, and lifted me by the hips onto the backseat.

Dante slid my dress up to my thighs. The cool air instantly prickled my legs as they dangled out of the car. One of my flip flops slipped off. Dante stepped in between my thighs and wrapped them around his torso. Once I squeezed his waist between my limbs, he let go of my legs and went for his zipper.

My heart beat like a jackhammer inside my chest. I felt trapped inside a dream waiting for someone to scream, "Wake up, Aurora!"

My breath quickened. Liquid fire swarmed my open legs. Everything felt hazy and provocative. The voice of reason had run for cover, knowing it was no match for Dante's need to ravish me or my own desire to be taken in a fit of passion strong enough to cause volcanoes to erupt.

There was nothing to stop us. We were both diseased, sterile—we had no life to give, only that to take, experience, and savor.

I thought Dante would be the kind of lover who vocalized his intentions, but his sober expression was an even bigger turn on.

Riiiiiiiiiiiiiiiip.

His fly zipped down. I couldn't see anything lying on my back. I propped myself on my elbows in time to watch Dante slide his fingers through his jean belt loops and tug down.

Just then, a long, drawn-out honk shattered the silence. My eardrums yelped in protest. I instantly cringed. The dreadful sound had come directly behind the Jeep, and now someone was hitting their horn over and over.

Dante quickly zipped his pants and pulled away from my legs. I was too embarrassed to peek outside at what was going on, but I saw Dante striding toward the origin of the sound.

"Yeah, yeah," he called out. "Drive on. Nothing to see here."

I yanked down my dress as the car zoomed away.

"Punk kids," Dante said. He sounded annoyed, but when he turned, he

smiled like it was all a fun joke.

I slipped off the seat and onto the concrete below, jamming my foot into the sandal I'd lost. I really was awake now. It had taken a car horn to blast through my delirium.

My lips pressed together into a tight frown. I didn't share Dante's amusement. He must have recognized my no-nonsense look.

Dante stepped over and kissed my forehead. "Sorry for the interruption. We'll take our time tonight."

Tonight? I was still trying to process the fact that I'd almost jumped Dante's bones inside a parking garage.

I hadn't even been back for thirty minutes.

And what about dinner with my mother? Were we just going to eat and leave after I'd been away for half a year? And would my mom really be okay with me spending the night with Dante? I knew she liked him, but I was still eighteen.

Without commenting, I walked around to the passenger's side and climbed in. Dante did the same. He looked at my legs as I smoothed my skirt over my knees.

"Nice tan," he said.

"That's what happens in places that have sunlight," I replied.

Dante started the Jeep. I stared at his throat when he turned his head to back up. We had to do a full circle around the garage to get out. I waited for Dante to rip around the corners, but he eased the vehicle around the turns as though transporting delicate cargo.

"So, can you tell me where you were now that you're back?"

"The Oregon desert. What about you? Go on many exciting missions over the summer?"

"Negative," Dante said. "Not much activity under the midnight sun. I think the vamps are hibernating."

Sounded great to me.

I felt as though I was emerging from a cave when we drove out of the parking garage. At five-fifty p.m. the sun remained high in the sky. I loved early fall in Alaska.

"You happy to be back?" Dante asked.

"Yeah," I answered. "I actually am."

"Missed me, did you?"

I smiled in response. Sure, I'd missed Dante, probably not as much as he'd like to believe. But more surprisingly, I'd missed home. Alaska had a certain charm and wild beauty that couldn't be found anywhere else. It took a wide open expanse of dust and tumbleweeds to make me appreciate the bigger picture.

Dante rolled his window down and pulled up to the ticket booth.

A middle-aged male attendant set a paper down. "That will be five dollars."

Dante handed the agent a ten and waited for his change.

Guess he'd been at the airport for over an hour. That, or we really had gone into a temporary kissing coma.

Once Dante got his change, I braced myself for his inevitable acceleration down International Airport Road, but he cruised along as though he had nowhere to be.

The last time I'd been down this road, it had been covered in snow. At the moment, the trees were dropping their leaves, but the grass was still green.

"So, my mom's all settled in with my grandma now," I said, watching the familiar scenery slide past.

I knew from my mom that Dante had helped her move to my grandmother's condo, which was another action that had sold me on a potential relationship with him, even more so due to the fact that he hadn't tried to score points by mentioning it in any of his texts.

"Yep, and she's become quite the tennis pro."

I had a difficult time picturing my mom in a short white pleated skirt smacking tennis balls across a net. Last time I saw her, she'd made a fashion statement out of bathrobes.

"Good."

"It's going to be a good year, Aurora."

I turned away from the window to look at Dante. He'd always called me "Sky". I liked the way "Aurora" rolled off his tongue. He made it sound beautiful.

"I could use a good year," I said. I wished that meant taking a break from the whole vampire hunting business. Nothing sounded better than putting aside the biting and killing to go to college and have a normal life. But in our line of business, there were always deaths to avenge. And Jared still needed to be dealt with.

Valerie was supposed to be keeping tabs on him while I was gone.

I could still picture his blue bandana tied around his forehead when he ran into my car head-on last November. I hoped he had it on when we took him down. It would be fitting to wrap it around his neck and choke every last immortal breath from his lungs. At least now I had practice.

"Ready to start college?" Dante asked, his thoughts miles away from my own.

I shook Jared from my mind. He didn't belong in my head during my homecoming. "Yeah." I'd signed up for my classes online in Oregon and gotten nearly all the courses and times I wanted. It no longer mattered to me that I was going in-state rather than to Notre Dame. College was college, and I was ready to learn at a higher level.

I was also more than ready to leave behind lockers, lunchrooms, and all the social bullshit surrounding high school. I was especially happy I wouldn't be going to the same school as Noel Harper.

But like Jared, she had no place in my mind tonight.

The first thing I noticed when my mom opened the door to my grandmother's condo was that she looked about fifty pounds lighter. She had on a pair of slim khakis and a thin V-neck sweater.

"Aurora!" she cried, embracing me tightly.

Once we'd pulled apart, I said, "Dang, Mom, you look incredible." And I thought I was the one who'd return from boot camp all trim and toned.

"Is that my grandbaby?" Gran called from the living room.

It was impossible to miss her in the bold red top and platinum blond bob with long sweeping bangs. She could have been Helen Mirren's twin. Grandma always looked good, but tonight she'd really done her generation proud. It looked like she and Mom had done just fine without me.

"Hi, Grandma."

"Come here and give me a hug. How was your internship?"

I glanced at my mom. Before I left town, we told grandma that I'd been offered an opportunity to intern and work the summer as a camp counselor for troubled teens. At least it had some semblance of truth. It was boot camp and the participating teens were understandably troubled.

But I was no counselor—more like an inmate.

I hugged Gran in the living room.

"It was an interesting experience," I said. "Very enriching."

She patted my shoulder. "I'm sure it was, my dear. I just don't understand why you had to leave before graduation. I don't have any pictures of you in your cap and gown."

"You can get those in another four years when I graduate from UAA."

"When you receive your B.A. in counseling?" Grandma asked, fishing.

The woman was way too keen. I'd never once in my life expressed an interest in counseling, which Gran had quickly pointed out after Mom and I brought up the fake internship.

I shrugged. "Sure."

"Ladies," Dante called from the kitchen. "I would like to propose a toast to Aurora's return."

He pulled the cork off a bottle of sparkling apple cider with his bare hand. A soft pop followed. Mom set out four glasses, placing them on the kitchen counter beside Dante.

Grandma and I walked over.

Once we'd toasted, Gran announced dinner.

"We made your favorite. Spaghetti with marinara sauce and a side of roasted vegetables and buttered bread, no garlic."

"Thanks," Dante and I said simultaneously.

We helped bring all the food to the table, where we began dishing it up immediately. Mom and Gran took seats opposite each other, so Dante and I

did the same.

"Was your flight late?" Gran asked.

"What do you mean?" I took a sip of apple cider.

"We were expecting you thirty minutes ago."

I nearly choked gulping the cider down. "Yeah, there was a slight delay." I avoided Dante's eyes to prevent my cheeks from turning fire-hydrant red.

"Tell me about these tennis tournaments," I said, turning to Mom. "Have you been kicking butt?"

Mom waved the compliment away with a flick of her slender wrist. She really did look great.

"I've had fun."

"And she kicked butt," Gran threw in. "Your mother beat the Harrison twins a couple weeks ago. Those two didn't know what hit them."

"Oh, Mom, stop. They were only thirteen."

Gran lifted her chin. "Even more reason to be proud."

"Way to go, Mom," I said.

"I wish you could have seen your mother's progression over the summer," Gran said, recounting the story of Mom's beginning lessons. When she first started, she had to serve the ball by bouncing it on the court because she couldn't serve overhand. By the end of summer, she'd moved onto walloping the teeny bopper twins.

Dante laughed along, but I kept catching him sneaking glances at me, eyebrows lifting whenever he caught my attention, as though eye-fucking me in secret at the dinner table.

I twisted spaghetti round and round my fork. Even opening my mouth to chew felt invasive with the way Dante watched my lips. Following the conversation was a bit difficult when all I could think about was sex, sex, and more sex.

We'll take our time tonight.

I'd only done it once… for all of thirty seconds. I wasn't sure anything under a minute really counted.

Doing it with Dante was a huge deal. I worked with him, and it was Dante. I wasn't sure I was ready. I'd only just returned. I still needed to buy textbooks and move into my new place.

Everything was changing so quickly. Everything was different since I'd left.

I cleared my throat. "What else did you guys do this summer?"

I included Dante in the general question I posed to the table, but he was polite enough to give Gran the floor. She and my mom had tried everything from pottery and scrapbooking to water aerobics and Zumba.

Zumba—now that must have been a pretty sight.

"And we're learning French," Gran said. "Or should I say, nous apprenons le français." She laughed.

"Très Bien," I said. I'd taken three years of high school French, almost

four if I'd have finished senior year.

Grandma rubbed her palms together. "Yes, well, it was a lot more fun when the handsome young fellow was teaching."

"Robert," Mom supplied with an amused grin.

"Yes, the handsome young fellow." Gran sighed. "Unfortunately, he was in an accident. Now Madame Vasser instructs us. She's young as well, though rather aloof for her age if you ask me. She is a native of France so at least she has the pronunciation down."

"Which is more helpful for our purposes of learning the language," Mom said, chuckling softly.

My stomach tightened.

They all looked so happy. I hated that I couldn't smile along with them, but if I'd learned one thing, it was to be cautious.

The fact that my mom and grandmother had a young female French teacher filled me with alarm. Valerie and I had dragged an unconscious vampire to safety in Sitka. Giselle Morrel, and she was a native French girl who collected figurines, stuffed animals… and swords.

Melcher told me letting her live had been a mistake.

Yeah, I'd made a lot of those in a short amount of time, but I hoped to make wiser decisions from here on out. I also planned on being more cautious.

"What does this French teacher look like?" I asked.

Mom and Grandma exchanged a look. Mom shrugged. "She's young. Maybe around your age or a couple years older."

Strike one.

"What color is her hair?"

"Blond."

Strike two. Now I needed visual confirmation. Mom said the teacher's last name was Vasser, but that didn't mean Giselle wasn't using an alias. She could call herself whatever she wanted, and no one would be the wiser.

"What sort of accident did the guy before her have?" I asked.

Grandma's fork clinked against her plate when she set it down.

"Aurora, is everything okay?" Mom asked.

I glanced at Dante. He looked just as perplexed as my mom and grandma.

Maybe my homecoming dinner wasn't the best time to get paranoid on everyone, but I needed to know my family would be safe. I'd talk to Mom about it later, ask to go to their next lesson and see for myself.

"Everything's great," I said, forcing a smile. "I'm just tired."

Mom leaned into the table. "They worked you hard?"

I nodded. "Had to cover a lot of miles every day."

"Sounds more like boot camp than an internship," Gran said.

The table went silent until Dante said, "This pasta is delicious. Bet you missed your mother's home cooking while you were gone."

“That reminds me,” Gran said. “We also took cooking classes this summer. The cake decorating one was my favorite.”

Mom scrunched her nose. “I liked the sushi one.”

“And I liked tasting the extras,” Dante said.

They all laughed, so I pushed myself to laugh along with them.

At the end of dinner, Dante began doing dishes while Mom and I cleared. Grandma dried and put things away.

On the next trip to the table, Mom motioned me inside Gran’s small office. Mom flicked on the light switch, illuminating a couch made up with a pillow and blanket beside Gran’s desk.

“Sorry it’s not your old room,” Mom said. “But I hope you’ll be comfortable before your big move.” She sniffed and touched my face gently. “My little girl is all grown up. I feel like I missed a big chunk of your life. You just got back and now you’re already moving out to start college.”

“Yes, but I’ll only be fifteen minutes away,” I said, giving her a hug. “I’m right here whenever you need me.”

“Same goes for you,” she said. “I’m here if you need me.”

She smiled and blinked back several tears.

The couch looked very appealing after my flight and the ordeal of my training kill. I was ready to crash. And it was a relief to find she and Dante weren’t in collaboration about me staying at his place. Good to know she wasn’t pimping me out like one of Melcher’s undercover vampire informants.

Now I had to break the news to Dante.

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4
Cohabitation

While Mom made tea, Dante and I slipped into the living room. I walked over to the large windows overlooking Westchester Lagoon. Grandma's condo, while smaller than our house, had an unbeatable view.

Dante joined my side. "What time should we head out?"

I glanced sideways at him. "I'm staying with my mom and grandma tonight."

His face fell, but Dante quickly recovered, all grins when he said, "You're right. What kind of gentleman would I be if I stole Mrs. Sky's daughter away from her on her first evening back?"

Gentleman? Yeah, that was pushing it. I had no doubt that the things Dante wanted to do to me were far from honorable.

As he leaned into me, I leaned away.

"I have a lot to do over the next four days," I said quickly. "School shopping, going through my things to decide what I'll take with me to my new apartment, packing, moving, unpacking, and settling in. Then school starts and I'll be even busier with homework and studying."

Dante's cheeks dimpled as an amused grin spread over his lips.

"Aurora…"

"And Melcher's probably going to throw my next assignment at me before I've even finished my first week of college."

"Aurora."

"What?"

Dante looked like he was holding back a laugh. "Relax. If you want to take things slow, we'll take them slow."

I took a deep breath and released it. The problem was I wasn't sure I wanted to take things anywhere except back to what we used to be: partners. Friends. Dante in the driver's seat. Me telling him to slow down, certainly not speed up.

"Okay," I said, nodding. "Thanks for understanding."

"Hey, I've got your back no matter what." Dante reached his hand over and touched my cheek gently. "And I'll help you move. Free labor, what do you say?"

"How can I refuse?" I asked.

Dante pulled his hand away and placed it on his hip. "Aurora Sky, you only want me for my body, don't you?"

I snorted.

"What are you two giggling about over there?" Gran called out.

She and Mom had settled onto the couch with their tea.

"Nothing," I said. "Dante offered to help me move into my new place."

"How nice," Grandma said.

Mom frowned, which surprised me. Maybe it was the idea of me moving out that saddened her. Thank the gods I was moving. Sharing the condo with Mom and Gran while trying to go to college and take down vampires would have driven me right over the edge and into the lagoon.

I loved my mom and grandma to death, but too much of them—Grandma especially—exhausted every ounce of me.

"I should get going," Dante said, giving my arm a quick pat. "Let Aurora have some time with her family and get some rest."

"Thank you for picking our little girl up at the airport," Gran said.

"I'll walk you to the door," I said.

Our shoulders brushed against each other as we passed by the living room.

"See you later, Dante," Mom called after us.

"Bye, Mrs. Sky."

Dante stopped in front of the door and flashed me one of his deviant smiles. He leaned in closer, kissed me on the cheek and said, "Sleep tight, don't let the vampires bite."

"Ha, ha," I replied. "See you later, Dante."

"Where are my things?" I asked Mom after Dante left.

The wave of exhaustion that hit me after dinner had broken and now I wanted to go through my belongings and decide what would come with me to the new place.

Grandma went to bed, leaving Mom and me in the living room. It was nice to be out of the barracks, but at the same time, I couldn't get comfortable. This was temporary. I was a guest in my grandmother's home.

I wanted my own space and privacy. I wanted to get settled in and establish some normalcy as I began a new chapter in my life.

"We put your belongings in a storage unit, honey," Mom said. "Most everything is boxed up and ready to move into your new place. Agent Melcher sent a courier over with the key last week. He said the place is fully furnished and ready for you to move into."

Melcher had texted me the address. So far, he hadn't mentioned anything about me having to come in, which was fine by me.

"Thanks, Mom. Sorry I wasn't around to help you pack."

She shrugged. "Your grandma pitched in and Dante helped move everything."

"That was nice of him."

The tick from the antique grandfather's clock against the wall filled the ensuing silence. It hadn't occurred to me that I was leaving behind my

childhood home forever. Even my mom had become a new woman in my absence. She looked healthy, happy… skinny, and she hadn't mentioned Dad once.

I wasn't the same, either. Honestly, I wasn't sure who I was anymore.

Mom cleared her throat. "I made an appointment for you at Planned Parenthood."

I scrunched up my nose. "Why?"

"I know how these things work, Aurora. You're about to start college. You're dating. I want to make sure you have the right protection."

"Oh my god, Mom!" Speaking of awkward. Why didn't she book Dante and me a room at the Captain Cook Hotel while she was at it? Maybe throw in a bottle of champagne.

Mom folded her arms. "Oh my god what? This is the kind of thing you have to be smart about."

If only she knew. I was sterile, so was Dante, and between the two of us we had enough diseases to wipe out the planet. At least they were contained. Melcher had us on a monthly treatment, which prevented us from turning into one of the undead. Other than that, we were like vampires in many ways, including fun side effects like blood cravings. Push-ups and ten mile runs didn't make the cravings go away.

I moistened my dry lips. Mom watched me, unblinking.

Poor woman, she couldn't get it into her head that I'd never lead a normal life. I decided to be kind and not sabotage her dreams of becoming a grandmother one day. Not yet. That never would have worked anyway, not in my line of work. "Hey, Mom. Mind watching Junior while I'm off killing vampires?" I snorted.

Mom frowned. "I'm serious, Aurora."

I rubbed the edge of my sundress absently between two fingers. "I know, Mom. I was thinking about something else."

"Right now I want you to be thinking about this. Your appointment is at ten a.m. Friday."

"Fine, I'll go."

"Thank you."

"Sure."

Mom lifted herself off the couch. "I'll let you get ready for bed." She leaned over to kiss my forehead. "I'm happy you're home."

Before she could walk away I said, "Hey, Mom…"

She stopped and turned.

"I'd like to go to your next French lesson."

Mom tilted her head when she looked at me. "You sounded upset about the French lessons earlier. Why?"

No need to alarm her. Once I confirmed that Madame Vasser wasn't actually Giselle Morrel, I'd let my mom and grandma conjugate verbs to their hearts' content, but right now I considered it my own secret mission.

“I wasn’t upset,” I said. “I was just thinking that I’m starting advanced French this semester and it might be beneficial to have a tutor. Gran mentioned the woman’s a native speaker. I’d like to check her out.”

“Oh, of course. We meet every second Wednesday night, except for tonight, of course. Welcoming you home is more important than practicing French.”

“Aw, you’re just saying that because I’m your daughter.”

“I’m saying that because I love you.”

After a six month’s separation, I suppose we were long overdue for a mushy moment. We hugged before Mom left me to get ready for bed.

Dante said he’d come by the next morning to help me move. Mom would have liked to have me around a couple more nights, but I was way too excited to settle into my new place.

Dressed in a pair of old jeans, a T-shirt, and a ponytail, I paced around the kitchen while waiting for Dante to show up.

Grandma looked up occasionally from her newspaper as she sipped coffee. Beside her, Mom drank a green smoothie.

“I don’t see what the hurry is,” Gran said. “She just got back.”

“She’s excited,” Mom said. “You remember what it’s like.”

“No,” Gran said. “No, I don’t. I was a daughter and then a wife. Things were a lot different in my day.”

Thank god I lived in the twenty-first century.

“Well, you have your own place now,” Mom said.

“And it was very lonely until you moved in.”

I hovered near the front door, letting them have a moment. Where was Dante? I opened the front door just as he walked up. A grin lit up his face.

“Someone missed me,” he said right before he pulled me into the hall and into his arms, covering my lips with his.

As soon as he paused for air, I said, “Shall we get going?”

Dante slid his hand down my back. “Sure. Let’s grab breakfast first.”

“Breakfast?” I knew my face fell. I didn’t want to sit around at a diner. I wanted to move.

Dante lifted his chin. “Gotta fuel up first.”

Couldn’t he have eaten breakfast before he came over? I kept my comment to myself. I didn’t want to sound ungrateful after Dante volunteered to spend his day lifting and moving my belongings.

So, we went out for breakfast first.

Since the place was already furnished, all we had to do was move my boxes in. Originally, I'd planned to go through my stuff and only bring the things I wanted with me, but since Mom had already packed it all into boxes, I figured it would be easier to move them and go through everything at the new place.

At this point, I wanted the quickest option.

Dante and I stuffed the first load into his Jeep and headed towards campus. I sat on the edge of my seat, hands clasped in my lap.

Dante looked over and chuckled. "Excited?" he asked.

I nodded. "Yeah, I am. I have my own place. I'm starting college… I wasn't sure I'd make it, and now look at me."

My heart fluttered with anticipation when he pulled into the neighborhood that would be my new home for the next four years. The lawns were fresh cut and spacious. I wasn't sure what Melcher had found for me. I'd been expecting an apartment, but there wasn't an apartment number on the address he'd sent.

"This is great," Dante said. "You're only a few minutes away from my place."

I nodded, barely listening.

"There it is!" I said. "That's the house. The blue one on the right."

Dante backed into the driveway. He stuck his chin out at the single car garage after we got out of the Jeep. "You'll have to wrestle your roommate for the garage."

"She can have it." I still had no desire to drive.

Speaking of roommates, maybe I should knock on the door and introduce myself before barging in with my things.

I walked up to the front door and tapped lightly. When there was no answer, I knocked harder and waited.

"Anyone home?" Dante called from the driveway where he unloaded the first round of boxes.

"I don't think so. Should I open the door?"

Dante joined me, box in hand. "Let's see your new place."

I unlocked the door and held it open for Dante.

"You first," he said.

We entered a foyer connected to a hallway. Dante set the box down at the base of a staircase to the right of the entrance. We followed the first floor hallway, which led directly to a full sized kitchen, dining room, and living room. Beige carpeting covered the living room floor, and the walls looked like they'd recently been painted a clean eggshell white.

Melcher hadn't lied about the house being furnished. An oak table with six matching chairs was set up in the dining area beneath a chandelier. The living room had a large flat screen TV, wraparound couch, recliner, lamps, and a rustic coffee table with drawers and space below.

There were framed pictures of pressed leaves and acrylic tree trunks. A large glass vase had been filled with irises and set on the coffee table. Small

potted plants added nice spots of greenery from side tables. An extra shelf below each was stacked with hardback books.

It was like stepping inside a Pottery Barn catalog. And I got to live here!

"Wow," Dante said, craning his neck around the room. "Either Melcher did some major setup or your roommate is an interior designer."

"I know. I love it!" I pressed the tips of my fingers together. "I can't wait to see my bedroom."

"Me neither." Dante wiggled his eyebrows.

Should have seen that one coming.

I retreated to the entryway and bounded up the set of stairs leading to the second floor. Four rooms were visible from the landing up top, one of which had the door shut. I stepped into the first room, an office painted pink and outfitted with bookshelves, a futon, and two desks. One was covered in neatly organized supplies and a narrow ceramic vase filled with dry red flowers. The other was empty.

"Aw," Dante said, peeking in. "You and your new roommate get to be study buddies."

I brushed past him, checking out the bathroom next.

I stopped at the edge of a fluffy white bath mat staring into a beautiful jetted tub. "Oh my god, a Jacuzzi tub!"

"Look at that," Dante said from behind me. "It's big enough for two."

I gave him a playful punch on the shoulder before breezing out. One more room to go. I passed the closed door and walked into the last open room at the far end of the house. With fingers trembling in excitement, I flicked on the light switch.

Compared to the other rooms it looked sparse, but there was a queen size bed on a simple wood frame with a matching nightstand and dresser. The sliding door to a rather large closet showed ample space for my clothes.

I felt like I needed to pinch myself. As if this wasn't real.

Dante barely had time to walk in and check it out before I dashed back into the hall.

"Let's start unloading!"

We were quick to load and unload boxes. Driving across town to the storage unit and back took the most time. When Dante brought up hunger pains and lunch, I told him not a bite until every last box had been moved.

With some Tetris-style loading, we were able to get everything over in three trips. On the third and final run, we returned to find a silver convertible with its top down in the driveway.

Guess my roommate was home.

Dante pulled in behind the convertible. I leaned forward, getting a better look at it.

"My roommate is obviously from out of state."

Dante smirked. "Give it one winter. She'll be trading the Beverly Hills-Mobile in for a 4-wheel drive."

"Or walking to school."

That was what I planned on doing. Campus was right across the nearest intersection. This location was fantastic and preferable to living in a dorm. My roommate could drive with the top down wearing a bikini in the dead of winter for all I cared. I loved what she'd done to the place.

Dante and I brought in the first of the boxes, setting them in the entry.

"Hello?" I called out.

When no one answered, I shrugged.

"Maybe she went jogging," Dante said. "I'll bring in the last of it."

"Thanks."

While Dante returned to the Jeep, I looked around the first floor. A big white purse with brown straps and a dangling crown charm had appeared on the kitchen counter during our absence. But there weren't any signs of a person downstairs.

"Hello?" I called up the stairs.

What happened to the welcome wagon? She had to have seen the boxes stacked by the stairs from the first loads Dante and I brought in.

I grabbed a box and headed up. Once I reached the landing, I set it down and looked around.

"Hello? I'm Aurora, your new roommate."

I heard movement from the second bedroom. The door was now open, so I walked over and stood in the frame. The walls were painted in a cheerful canary yellow, covered with mixed-media wall art. A slender, petite girl stood at her armoire, her back to me. She had silky auburn hair accented by gold and copper highlights. She wore a jean jacket over a floral skirt… or dress. I couldn't tell from behind.

"Hi," I said.

I could tell even before she turned around that she'd be pretty.

I was beginning to wonder if she would turn around. Great, Melcher had stuck me with a sorority snob.

"Hello!" I repeated.

The girl gave a start, reached for her head, and pulled out a pair of ear buds.

That made me start to chuckle with relief until she turned around.

And there she stood. Noel Harper. She might not have black hair or a hoodie, but it was her all right. The friend who had betrayed me.

I hadn't recognized Noel from behind with the new hair and getup. Even up front she looked different with her smooth, glowing skin tone, soft makeup, and layered hair. She looked like she could be valedictorian or prom queen.

What happened to the corset, tights, arm warmers, and netted skirts she

used to wear? Maybe she had a new undercover assignment or maybe—and this was something I did not want to consider—she and Fane were together and love had made her blossom like a god damn flower.

This had to be a mistake.

"Aurora…" she said hesitantly. "You made it."

Her voice hadn't changed.

I narrowed my eyes. "Disappointed Marcus didn't succeed in killing me?"

Assuming Melcher told her about Marcus. He was bound to. The palace was Noel's territory.

Noel reached behind her back and set her iPod on top of the armoire without breaking eye contact.

"I was shocked when I heard Marcus was responsible for killing Mike… and that he tried to kill you. Aurora, I'm so sorry. I feel responsible for putting you in that situation."

"You are responsible for putting me in that situation."

Noel's lips formed a pout right before she rushed in to plead her case. There wasn't nearly enough pleading in her voice—more of a matter-of-fact explanation.

A set of bangle bracelets jangled on Noel's wrist when she moved her arm.

"I want you to know that was a onetime thing and hardly that. I don't like Fane that way. Never have. He's a nice guy, but I liked Gavin and when I went to the palace that night, I overheard him taunting Fane, giving him a hard time for getting dumped by you and Valerie, so I stepped in."

Great, so now I was the bad guy and Noel the champion with a heart of gold.

"All I wanted to do was make it appear like Fane and I were going off together so Gavin would let up and leave him alone." Noel took a breath that sounded more like a sigh. "For appearance's sake we went upstairs to the October room. I never meant for anything to happen, but I started thinking about Gavin and I felt so hurt and angry. I don't know. I guess I was hoping he'd be jealous if Fane bit me."

In other words, it was worth it to stab me in the back to try and make another vampire jealous. It was only slightly less terrible than hooking up.

I jammed my hand on my hip.

"You could have gone up with any other vampire, but you chose Fane."

Noel frowned. "I told you, I was helping him."

"So I saw," I said. "Your neck was a big help to him."

Noel had the audacity to look pissed by what I'd said. Her lips curled back. Oh, it was on. I'd waited six long months to have it out with the little bitch.

Before Noel could launch anything back, the front door opened with a bang, closing with slightly less force. The stairs creaked and echoed into the

hallway.

"Oh, Aurora, where are you?"

In my agitation at discovering the identity of my new roommate, I'd nearly forgotten about Dante.

"Is it time to break in your new bed?"

Noel craned her head toward the door.

I followed her gaze to Dante when he appeared behind me. He smiled when he saw me, glanced over my shoulder and saw Noel, did a double-take, and smiled wider.

"Harper, is that you?" Dante pushed past me. "Look at you!" Dante walked up to Noel and picked her up. "Long time no see, Minnie Mouse!"

Noel laughed when Dante squeezed her against his chest before putting her down.

That's right. I'd nearly forgotten that Melcher had paired them up twice. Not only that, but Dante told me he'd bitten Noel on their last mission in Fairbanks as part of a ruse they'd concocted that he was Noel's vampire boyfriend. Dante had told me it had been Noel's idea. Of course it had. She had a thing for biting. It hadn't bothered me at the time, but that was before I'd walked in on her and Fane.

I ground my teeth together as Noel and Dante made pleasantries.

"Dang, looking good, girl," Dante said, giving Noel the once over. "You undercover?"

No, I'm just a vampire-stealing strumpet wannabe, I thought to myself bitterly.

Noel flipped her hair over one shoulder. It had grown back since I last saw her. "I'm trying a new look for senior year. Do you like it?"

"I love it. That's right. Graduation year. Soon you'll be joining Aurora and me at the U of A." He looked around Noel's bedroom. "You've already got a place near campus. Head start. Nice."

I folded my arms across my chest. "Isn't this a bit far from West High?"

"It's not too out of the way," Noel said. "Besides, I like living near campus." She smiled deviously. "College boys are yummy."

Did Noel get a complete personality makeover in addition to her looks?

The saucy grin she shared with Dante brought out the rage in my heart.

"You know what? That's fine, Noel. Play your little games. Just stay out of my sight."

I pivoted and stormed out of her room, backtracking toward the kitchen. I needed my purse, my phone, and Melcher on the line pronto because there was no way in hell I'd room with Noel. Great flippin' way to start my first semester of college. Thank you very much, Melcher!

Dante followed me outside, looking utterly baffled.

"What's up with you and Harper?"

Sure, like I could explain that one. If Fane weren't a vampire, I could try. Dante was pretty open-minded, but when it came to vampires, there were no

gray areas. We were vampire hunters. We killed blood suckers. End of story.

I waved his question off. “We had a fight before I left. It’s not worth repeating.”

Dante leaned in. “It must have been some fight to hold a grudge for six months.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

Dante looked from me to the house. “What do you want to do? You’re going to have to make up sooner or later. You live together now. Maybe this is the perfect opportunity to work out your differences.”

“Not right now,” I said. Not ever. “I’m not in the mood. Can we go to your place?”

Dante nodded. “Of course. My roommate’s home, though. Don’t want him starting in on the noise complaints again.” Dante winked.

He’d picked the wrong time to joke around.

My voice turned to stone. “You know what? Take me home.”

Dante’s face dropped in confusion. He looked past my shoulder.

“To my grandma’s condo,” I specified. I stormed past him and got inside the Jeep, slamming the door behind me.

Dante hurried around the car to the driver’s seat.

“What did I do?” he asked as soon as he’d sat down beside me.

His mopey expression reminded me of a wounded puppy.

I turned in my seat. “You’ve been with a lot of women. I get it. You don’t have to throw it in my face every chance you get.”

I turned away, throwing my back roughly against the passenger’s seat.

I kept expecting to hear the rev of the engine. I didn’t care if Dante gunned it to Gran’s. The sooner the better. I didn’t know why I ever thought this could work. Dante wasn’t boyfriend material. I’d done the hookup thing one time before, and I was never doing it again.

When Dante made no move to start the car, I stole a sideways look at him.

He grinned from ear to ear.

“What?” I demanded.

He gave a slight headshake. “You’re so damn cute.”

I wasn’t cute. I was angry. I opened my mouth to tell him, but he beat me to the punch.

“And you’re right. I’ve been an ass. The truth is I’ve never had a serious girlfriend.” Dante began tapping the steering wheel. “I’ve never wanted to… until you.”

I’d never considered myself a sucker for honeyed words, but damn he made my heart soar in the most weightless sort of way when he said those things.

“I haven’t been with anyone in seven months, not since we went out for pizza together.”

Seven months! For a hot-blooded young man like Dante, that was like

the Sahara of all dry spells. No wonder he talked dirty every chance he got.

The night we had pizza hadn't even been a date. I couldn't believe he'd hold out for someone who wasn't a sure thing. It made me believe he really did care about me.

Dante's car keys jingled right before he turned on the ignition.

I gave him another look, no longer sure of the plan.

Dante shot me a dimpled grin. "Let's get out of here. Grab lunch. Go for a walk along the coastal trail. What do you say?"

"I'd say that sounds fine to me." I shrugged casually, but inside my heart hummed a happy tune. I'd never been called cute before, or ever expected Dante to live like a monk until my return. We weren't even going out when I left.

That was a hell of a lot more than I could say for Fane. Fane had shacked up with Valerie the moment I broke up with him, then bitten Noel when Valerie ditched him for Gavin. Death was overrated all right. It was high time I chose life.

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5
Two's Company

I didn't know what I would have done without Dante in the final days leading up to fall semester. We bought textbooks and school supplies together. He gave me a campus tour. It had been easy to take an in-state college for granted, but now that the first semester was approaching, I suddenly felt the way I did before starting high school—magnified by ten.

This was college!

All my clothes were unpacked, and I'd even put a couple posters on the wall. Dante offered to help me paint my room any color I wanted, but I was more interested in getting everything ready before school started.

Yep, I dug my heels in and decided to stick it out.

No way was Noel chasing me out of the house. It was great, and so was the location. Two out of three. Couldn't have it all. The key to cohabitation was simply a matter of treating Noel like any other unwanted roommate. As long as we kept out of each other's way, it might possibly work.

She had to leave early for high school, giving me time to relax with my tea and toast before my first class started at ten. Since I didn't have homework yet, I used the time to assemble my first-day-of-college outfit—jeans, tee, and a cardigan.

Once dressed, I headed back downstairs to spend my remaining half hour flipping through the first chapters in my textbooks. Before I cleared the kitchen, someone knocked at the front door. I turned around, heading the way I'd just come.

I hoped it wasn't my mom surprising me on my first day of school. I'd told her she could come see the place at the end of the week—not while I was a bundle of nerves on my first day.

I hand-brushed my hair over my shoulder as I walked to the entryway. When I opened the door, it wasn't my mom waiting outside, but Fane Donado.

He stood a foot from the door all casual-like: tall, lean, and dressed in a pair of blue jeans and a graphic tee of a screaming Indian head with skyscrapers for a mohawk. He wasn't wearing a jacket, which put me face to face with his beautiful abs. Admiring them for even a second was out of the question.

"Aurora Sky," he said with a familiar inflection that made my heart ache just a little.

How dare he? My lips curled back in outrage.

"Noel's not here."

"I'm not here to see Noel."

"What do you want, Fane?"

He straightened. "To clear things up. You took off before I got a chance."

"I'm not interested in hearing your excuses."

Before I could close the door, Fane stopped it with his hand. He leaned into me, which made me pull back. His body moved forward as mine withdrew, into the entryway. Fane shut the door behind him.

"I did not invite you in," I said.

This was supposed to be my space. Bad enough I had to share it with Noel Harper. Now I had Fane showing up unannounced on my first day of college. If only real vampires had to receive permission to enter. But there was nothing mythical about them. They were all just undying brutes.

"We need to talk," Fane said.

"Then why didn't you call?"

Six months of radio silence. True, I wouldn't have picked up or returned his call, but he could have at least tried.

Fane frowned. At least he kept his distance now that he'd shown himself inside.

"This is a conversation I wanted to have face-to-face. I stopped by your house six months ago and your mother said you'd left the state and weren't coming back."

I snorted. Good 'ol' Mom. In this case I found her lie more funny than upsetting.

"Well, I don't have time to talk right now. I need to leave for class in thirty minutes." Speaking of which, "Shouldn't you be at school? How did you get this address?"

"I'm not going to school this year," Fane said. "And I got your address from Noel."

Of course, good old Noel. At one time she thought Fane and I were a bad idea. Now she had him showing up unannounced at my doorstep. I should write her a thank you card.

Fane's jaw moved from side-to-side as though chewing on an invisible toothpick.

"How come you never told me that Valerie worked in your division?"

My mouth flew open. "Who told you that?"

When Fane didn't answer I threw an arm in the air. "Well, of course, Noel! Noel gave it all up, didn't she?" What the hell was wrong with her? What part of secret government agency didn't she get? I'm pretty sure sharing the identities of informants with a vampire was a big fat no-no.

Fane started toward me then stopped when I pulled back.

He stretched his arms out. "Noel and I never hooked up. She was concerned vampires could identify her blood type by taste and potentially associate her involvement with your vampire hunting organization. Given her knowledge and my past relationship with Valerie, she asked me to perform a taste test—a comparison between their blood types and whether I detected

something similar."

Oh, "perform a taste test" like it was something clinical rather than lips, teeth, and tongue.

"And you just stumbled into the first bedroom you came across?"

Fane stared at me a moment before answering. "That's right."

"This is such crap, Fane!"

"I know how it sounds."

What about Noel's excuse that she'd been trying to make Gavin jealous? She was such a little liar. I was more inclined to believe Fane.

Either way, a true friend wouldn't use her friend's ex to make another guy jealous. And if Fane really needed to perform a taste test, Noel could have used a knife to make a cut and dripped her blood into a spoon or any other indirect object.

There were simply no excuses.

I opened my mouth to say so when Fane added, "Noel had some really dark things going on in her personal life. She needed my help."

Noel had dark things going on in her life? Noel!

She certainly looked like she was doing okay now.

This was too much.

My fingers curled into fists. My shoulders hunched, making my neck ache.

"Do you have any idea what happened to me after I left you two at the palace?"

Fane tilted his head.

"Marcus tried to kill me. Not right away, oh no. First he duct-taped my arms, legs, and mouth and chained me to his bedroom ceiling. Then he tried to murder me inside his music room. Ever seen it?"

Fane tried to reach for me, but I moved aside swiftly. He did not get to comfort me.

His lips pressed together firmly.

I straightened my shoulders. "But I killed him first. I'm sure it's been a heavy blow for the vampire community around here."

I watched Fane's face for some kind of reaction, anything. Then I saw it, the flash of emotion I'd been waiting for, wanting.

His jaw tightened. The bridge of his nose wrinkled as his angry eyes hit mine. "You think I care about Marcus? It's you I was worried about."

He stepped towards me, but I was quicker, slipping past, getting behind him and beside the door.

"You need to go," I said.

My heartbeat had turned irregular the moment he showed up. The longer he stayed the more shallow my breaths became. I needed to breathe again.

As I reached for the doorknob Fane suddenly said, "I know why you broke up with me."

My hand froze mid-reach and my breath stopped altogether.

The way he stared into my eyes felt intrusive. We shared history, Fane and I. A brief, but intense past that always seemed to linger just below the surface no matter how hard I tried to push it down.

I broke eye contact, only to land on his lips as they moved.

"I know you did it to protect me from Valerie."

Let me guess? Noel. That girl needed to be strangled in her sleep.

Fane leaned closer.

Static filled my insides, humming and buzzing, putting me into a temporary trance. It was that sensual voice and those damn lips. I couldn't look at them and not think about kissing him. Not that I'd ever act on it again. Fane had said I wasn't ready to cross that line, but he'd blown that bridge up with a cannon ball. Unfortunately, it didn't make his lips any less appealing. I was like an addict who would forever miss the taste of nicotine even knowing every lungful was detrimental to my health.

Fane moved in, inching his way up to me, our lips now a breath apart. His liquid brown eyes shone as he leaned forward.

What the hell was he doing? First of all, I was kind of with Dante. Second of all, no! No! No! Never! Fane had hooked back up with Valerie, pushed me away, and, for his final pièce de résistance, bitten Noel. Some guys had no right to a second chance. Add vampire to the list of offenses and that's what I called the final nail in the coffin. We had no business being together in the first place.

I leaned back abruptly. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

Fane's forehead wrinkled in confusion.

My body stretched and straightened into combat mode.

"Aren't you forgetting how you hooked up with Valerie after I ended things in an effort to save you?"

Fane's voice sobered. "I did that so she'd leave you alone. Valerie's dangerous. If I didn't humor her she very likely would have gone after you."

My shoulders straightened even more. "Yeah, well, I'm dangerous, too."

Fane shook his head. "I didn't know that at the time. All I knew is that Valerie was capable of anything, and I didn't want her lashing out at you. I thought I was protecting you. I shouldn't have pushed you away. I should have stayed by your side."

He reached for my face. I stepped back and grabbed the door handle.

"It's too late," I said.

Our eyes locked. It was tempting to stare at him just a little longer, but rationality kicked in and I turned the handle. Before I finished twisting the knob, a fist pounded on the other side of the door. My heart leapt straight up my throat. I nearly screamed.

Now what? I didn't want anyone to see me with Fane. Maybe if I kept quiet enough whoever it was would go away.

The knocking resumed.

I looked at Fane, who looked at my hand frozen on the doorknob. He

raised one eyebrow and smiled slowly.

The person behind the door reached for the knob on the outside and turned. My hand turned with it. This time, I willed it to be my mom, not Dante, but who else would let themselves in?

The door moved outward.

Dante stood on the threshold grinning from ear to ear. He continued to grin even after he saw Fane lingering behind me.

Dante leaned in to give me a loud smack on the lips. "Hey, babe."

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I came over to give you a lift to school."

"It's across the street."

Dante pulled me against him. "Yeah, but it's your first day. I wanted to be here for that."

I would have given my left arm to see Fane's expression when Dante kissed me. Probably similar to the cable tight frown currently stretched across his face.

"Hey, man," Dante said, one arm snaking around my waist, the other reaching forward. "I'm Dante."

Recognition lit up Fane's eyes. His jaw loosened as he smiled and gave Dante's hand one firm pump.

"Dante," Fane repeated. "How could I forget that name? Aurora's big brother, right?"

The fiend looked very pleased with himself all of the sudden.

Dante's hand dropped from my waist as he turned to me. "Brother?"

Fane skirted past us. "I'll let you two have some family time," he said as he walked out the door.

Couldn't leave without causing problems, could he? I slammed the door shut.

Dante folded his arms across his chest. I swear he'd grown an inch taller.

"Aurora? Who was that?"

I sighed. "Can we sit down before we talk?"

Dante extended an arm forward for me to lead the way.

I savored my last seconds of peace in the twenty seconds it took to reach the living room. I know I'd mentioned sitting, but I didn't.

"That was my ex-boyfriend."

The muscles on Dante's chest tightened. I was so used to his carefree grin that it gave me no small thrill to see his jaw clamp down and his eyes narrow.

"What was he doing here?"

I shrugged, suddenly unable to meet Dante's eye. "He showed up unannounced. I guess he wanted to apologize for being a dick."

"You gave your ex-boyfriend your new address?"

"No way! That was Noel. They're friends."

"Great. Your ex and your friend are tight."

"Noel's not my friend!" I cried, but Dante wasn't listening.

"Why did he call me your brother?"

Oops. That wasn't good.

"Umm," I said, nudging the carpet with the tip of my toe. "Remember when we went to Fairbanks to interrogate that kid involved in Janine's death?" Maybe bringing up Dante's ex-lover would help my cause.

"Yeah," Dante said.

"Remember how I'd just broken up with a guy and told him I was going out with you so he wouldn't try getting back together with me?"

"Yeah," Dante said.

"Well, that was him," I said nodding toward the hall. "He's the guy who went out with Valerie first."

Dante's arms remained locked across his chest.

"I remember you telling me about him," he said. "How is it he's dated both you and Valerie and is friends with Noel? Is he another informant I haven't met?"

I smiled before I could stop myself. The whole thing was too ridiculous.

"He's not an informant. We all went to Denali High School together and somehow our lives collided." I shrugged. "It's crazy, I know."

Dante frowned.

"What's his name?"

"Francesco."

Dante huffed. "What kind of name is that?"

Fane had asked the same thing about Dante.

"It's Italian."

"Oh, Italian." Dante rolled his eyes. "You still haven't told me why spaghetti boy referred to me as your brother."

Spaghetti boy, really? One look at Dante's face was enough to know now wasn't the time to tease him. Now wasn't the time to be having this conversation period. I had my first class to get to.

"He helped me when I was in trouble and I didn't want him to think I'd dumped him for another guy, so I told him the truth. At least part of it. That I'd lied about going out with you."

"Still doesn't explain the brother comment."

I had to think back a moment before it came back to me. I stopped fiddling with my hair.

"The day I first met you I was with him. We'd actually just started going out. Anyway, you zipped me off to Fairbanks with zero notice. Naturally my boyfriend wondered where I'd been and how I'd gotten there since I was only letting my mother drive me around at the time. I said I'd gone with a friend and he figured out I'd gone with a guy so to make him feel better I said you felt more like a big brother type."

"Ouch," Dante said. His arms dropped to his sides as though he'd been hit in the chest.

"I'd just met you."

Dante shook his head. "That was your first impression of me—as a brotherly type?" He grimaced before continuing. "The first time I met you I was like, wow, this chick is hot! When you opened your sassy mouth I was a complete goner."

My heart flipped. Dante made things so difficult for me when he said stuff like that.

It's not as if he had been available, either.

"You were with Janine when we first met."

"Friends with benefits, may she rest in peace," Dante added quickly looking upwards. "Anyway, that's all in the past."

"Exactly," I said.

Water under the bridge to nowhere.

Dante took a step toward me. "Except your past showed up at the doorstep and barged his way in."

"See why I don't want to be roommates with Noel?"

Dante veered over to the couch and sunk into a sofa cushion, eyes on mine. "I can't picture you with that guy. You're so sweet and he looks like riffraff."

"Riffraff?" I repeated and laughed. "I guess you could say that. We went out right after my accident. I suppose I was feeling dark at the time."

Dante nodded as though that made perfect sense. But it was more than that. Going out with Fane hadn't been an act of rebellion so much as a grasp at sanity. He'd been my beacon of light during a dark time. Salvation came in the most unlikely guise.

But Dante didn't need to know that.

"Did you two ever…"

"No!" I exclaimed before Dante could finish his sentence. "We only went out for a couple weeks."

Dante grinned. "That's my girl—make 'em wait. I almost forgot that you're a virgin."

"I'm not a virgin."

"Oh, really," Dante said, smiling wider.

"No, now how about that ride to school?"

Dante patted the cushion beside him. "Or we could play hooky."

"Not on my first day." I frowned.

Sometimes, I felt like Dante didn't see me at all—like I was just a concept inside his head. I knew he cared about me, but it would be nice if he took life a little more seriously.

Fane cared about me, too, and even when he screwed up, I did believe it was for some greater purpose—at least in his mind.

Why did he have to show up at the doorstep now? Why did he have to show up at all?

If he'd wanted to try and make amends he should have tried six months

ago.

Oh right, he had… before my mom sent him packing.

Didn't matter. I'd gone to boot camp to bury the past and reinvent myself. Life was an open road with only one direction. Forward.

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6
Extra Credit

Most courses at UAA followed a Monday/Wednesday or Tuesday/Thursday schedule, which left me with Fridays off and the house all to myself… in theory.

That first Friday, I didn't turn up the stereo and dance around the house, nor did I draw myself a nice warm bubble bath in the Jacuzzi, or even spread my books over the dining table and get a head start on my assignments.

I invited Valerie Ward over.

We'd kept in touch by text, and she was also enrolled at UAA, but this was the first I'd seen her since we parted ways in the Juneau airport.

She arrived in cutoff jean shorts and a tank top, pushing her sunglasses over her head after I let her inside. Without so much as a hello, Valerie made her way through the kitchen and dining room, flip flops slapping against the back of her heels.

"Is this your place?" she demanded.

Yeah, I invited you here. I caught up to her in the living room, where she spun around taking everything in. Her eyes landed on me. She frowned. "You suck!"

"Where do you live?"

"With one of the unit's staffers." Valerie scowled. "I was supposed to move in with a real roommate, but then I took off. Back on probation." She sighed. Her face lit up a second later. "But now I have a place to hang out. Make me a copy of your key. It will be perfect. I can come over and study during the long gaps I have between classes on Mondays and Wednesdays." She eyed the couch. "Beats the hell out of the library."

I chewed on my lower lip.

"What's the problem?" Valerie demanded.

The problem was I had to think a moment. If Valerie suddenly started hanging out, I'd be the one stuck studying at the library just to have some peace and quiet. And what if, god forbid, Fane showed up again?

"If I gave you a key, what's to stop you from bringing guys over all the time?"

I could see it now, Valerie's after school brothel, no silver bats to prevent me from walking in on the flavor of the week—or worse, flavors.

"The only guy I'd invite over is Gavin," Valerie said.

Sure, invite a vampire over into a house full of informants and assassins. At least she'd moved on from Fane.

"You're still with Gavin?" I asked.

Valerie's spine straightened. "I am capable of a long term relationship. I

was with Fane for almost five months before you came along. All-time record. Almost made it to our half year anniversary until you turned all morbid and moody and put on your doomsday show. Fane's a sucker for the macabre."

"Well, I'm not with him now," I said tersely.

Remind me why I had invited the vixen over? Oh, right. The matter of Jared—Melcher's unorthodox recruiter. Vampire. Murderer. The man responsible for bringing Valerie and me to the brink of death and turning us into government slaves.

Time to cut to the chase.

"Where's Jared?"

Valerie leaned back against the kitchen counter, grinning. "I offed him while you were at your extended sleepover. Kidding. The leech has gone into hiding."

"You haven't seen him at all?"

"Not since I shot him in Sitka. This is your fault by the way. You should have finished him off when you had the chance or let me do it."

"I had no idea who he really was."

Valerie sniffed. "Doesn't matter. He tried to kill us… a second time."

He wasn't much of a recruiter if his habit was to take down team members less than a year after forcing them into service. Something told me Jared had little regard for life. People were his playthings, and when they didn't do what he wanted, he either forced their hand or wiped them out completely. He killed his own family for deserting him in Paris.

Like it was their fault he murdered people, got caught, and thrown in prison.

If only he'd stayed behind bars, or better yet, gone the way of the guillotine. Off with his head! I wouldn't have any blood on my hands and would be blissfully in the dark about vampires.

Blaming me for anything to do with Jared wasn't very cool, either.

"Sorry," I said, not masking the aggravation in my voice. "I'm still new to the whole killing thing."

Hey, I was human. Hesitating to murder a person, even an undead one, counted as a strength in my opinion.

Valerie drummed her nails on the counter before responding. "Now that you've been through boot camp, I can only hope you're ready to take action."

"I'm ready. I just don't know how we find Jared."

"All in good time," Valerie said.

All in good time? Who was this redhead standing beside me? Valerie was not the patient type. It worried me just a little.

"And in the meantime?"

"Stick to the routine," Valerie said. "Play the part. Don't give Melcher any reason to be suspicious."

"I haven't seen Melcher yet." And I had to say, I didn't miss him. That was one perk of boot camp. No spur-of-the-moment missions and no Melcher.

"You will. He wants me, you, and Dante in on these Tastings."

And there it was. Right back into the field. Active duty. Welcome home, Agent Sky!

I suppressed a sigh.

"How'd your interview with Diederick go?"

"It didn't. Melcher called it off." Valerie pulled at a loose string fraying from her cutoff jeans.

"Why?" I asked.

"Before the interview, I found out that Diederick required a blood sample. He tests for AB positive and negative blood—vampire blood. The guy doesn't want any vampires or potential vampires working as wine girls."

"Why not?"

Valerie shrugged. "I don't know. They don't like the aftertaste of our blood or something. I never knew there was such a thing as a picky blood sucker until now."

I thought briefly of what Noel and Fane had said about testing her blood. Maybe there was something to that after all.

"What's the plan?" I asked

"Melcher will go over it this weekend with us. Dante got himself signed up as a vampire client." Valerie snorted. "Dante a vampire… and I'm the Virgin Mary."

I frowned. "Melcher hasn't mentioned a meeting to me. How come he told you?"

"Because we've been in contact. You were gone for six months. Or have you forgotten?" Valerie's phone chimed. She glanced at the screen, let out an exasperated breath, and pushed away from the counter.

"Gotta run."

I followed her to the door.

Valerie paused in the entryway, staring at her phone before dropping it inside her purse.

"Stage three clinger," she said with an eye roll.

"Who? Gavin?"

"Big time." Valerie tossed her hair back. "He enrolled at UAA just to be near me. Speaking of… you should make two keys. One for me and one for Gavin."

"Gavin can't come over here."

I wasn't cold-hearted enough to do that to Noel.

"Why not?" Valerie demanded, her face changing from smug to scowl instantly.

"Noel lives here, too."

That ought to be explanation enough. Noel would hate seeing Valerie around even more than Gavin. Too bad. Valerie and I might not have been friends, but we were teammates, and there were times when people simply had to rise above personality disorders.

Valerie's lips formed a pout. "Melcher let Noel Harper live here?"

"Yeah, she was here first. I didn't know until I moved in." Much as I didn't enjoy hearing from Melcher, a little heads up from time to time would be nice.

"Well, isn't that just peachy? One never-ending slumber party. How do you spend your Friday nights? Taking quizzes and painting your nails, rocking out to Justin Bieber?" Valerie huffed.

Was it my imagination, or did Valerie sound jealous?

"I just moved in," I said. "This is only my second Friday night."

That earned me a full on glare right before Valerie turned on her heel and yanked open the door. "Well, don't expect me to come by with my slippers. I have a life." With that, she strutted down the driveway, flip flops slapping the pavement in her wake.

Valerie hadn't been kidding about Melcher calling us in.

Dante picked me up Saturday afternoon, fifteen minutes before the appointed meeting.

"Did Melcher find a replacement for Agent Crist?" I asked as Dante zoomed towards the base.

As the light at the intersection ahead turned yellow, Dante punched the gas. My body jolted backward. I reached for the side of the door, fingers searching for something to grip. Now this was more like old times. Far less frightening on dry pavement.

"Not yet, but hopefully soon. He needs someone to counterbalance him."

"What do you mean?"

"Now he has to play both good cop and bad cop. You'll see."

Valerie arrived at the meeting first. She always seemed to be there first, which surprised me. The vixen didn't strike me as a kiss up. She could probably use the extra brownie points after wigging out in Sitka and jumping the first plane to the lower forty-eight. Then again, maybe it would help if she didn't argue with Melcher.

The two of them were bickering over his desk when Dante and I walked in. Valerie jammed a finger in my direction.

"Aurora and Noel get their own place even though I have seniority."

"We've already been over this," Melcher said through clenched teeth. "For now you're staying with Kennick."

His cheeks flushed as his voice rose. Maybe Dante had a point.

"But I have to drive clear across town to get on campus," Valerie whined.

"Enough!" Melcher bellowed.

Valerie plopped into the chair in front of his desk, arms folded, frowning. While Melcher's attention was elsewhere, Dante shot me a quick "told you

so" smirk.

"Hello, Dante. Aurora," Melcher said, barely looking at us as he sat at his desk.

Though I'd been expecting more of a welcome, I didn't mind the brush off. I didn't need Melcher's congratulations or mumbo jumbo about my value to the team. And maybe I'd hold off on complaining about my current roommate, at least until Crist's replacement started. I never thought I'd miss the sour-faced woman.

I took the seat beside Valerie. Dante leaned against the wall.

Melcher placed his hands on his desk. "Let's get down to business, shall we?" He narrowed his eyes at Valerie. "Although we had a big win last February with the death of Crist's killer, Andre Morrel, we're now dealing with something far worse. Tastings." Melcher's nose wrinkled as though swallowing stale milk.

I was more disgusted by Melcher and Jared's conspiracy. So they were still pinning Crist's death on Jared's scapegoat, Andre.

Melcher cleared his throat. "Thanks to Dante and Noel, we are now aware of these exclusive tasting parties for vampires willing to pay top dollar to drink from girls who imbibe on wine."

"Bottoms up," Dante said.

"The way you like them," Valerie said with a smirk.

That only made Dante's grin widen.

Melcher took a moment to glare at both of them. Silence settled over the office. He cleared his throat and continued.

"Originally I hoped to instate Miss Ward as an undercover wine girl to report on what's happening behind closed doors and who is going behind them. But Diederick's screening process includes a blood sample, and he doesn't allow anyone with AB negative or positive blood to work the private rooms."

"Could we switch the samples?" Dante asked.

"He takes a direct sample," Melcher said.

Valerie turned in her chair to look at Dante. "You do remember this is a vampire we're dealing with, right? What do you think he's going to do, allow applicants to bring in their own vial of personally labeled blood?"

"What's wrong with AB blood?" I cut in.

Melcher clasped his hands together. "The infected aren't fond of the aftertaste."

I could still hear Marcus' words after he bit me.

You taste like death.

Yet another important tidbit Melcher kept from us.

"How can you ask informants to get within biting distance of vampires if their blood is going to turn their subjects off?" I asked, waving a hand at Valerie.

She arched a brow at Melcher. "Yeah, what's the deal, Melcher?"

How's that for turning the tables? I kind of liked this gang up on Melcher scenario. His jaw tightened and lids lowered. Melcher leaned forward.

"Not all vampires are as particular as others, especially not the newer ones. They might not notice for several decades."

"Fane wasn't a new vampire!" Valerie cried. "You told me yourself, he's been around almost as long as the Mona Lisa. Plenty of time to taste a difference in my blood."

I forced myself to sit still and look neutral at the mention of Fane's name. I whispered a silent prayer that Dante wouldn't connect the name Fane with Francesco.

Valerie's elbows were bent, palms pressed against the chair's armrests as though preparing to launch herself at Melcher.

"Do you know what Fane thought the first time he bit me?" she demanded. "He thought I was a vampire!"

Dante snorted and leaned away from the wall. "Sounds real bright, this vamp you dated. Love the name. Totally inconspicuous."

I pulled on the edge of my shirt collar, frowning. Was it getting hot in here?

Valerie glared at Dante. "Fane would crush you, grind you, and drink you for breakfast, little boy. He's not trying to be inconspicuous. That's how big his balls are."

Definitely too hot.

Melcher slapped his desk suddenly, startling us all. "Enough of that! Need I remind all of you that you work for an elite division of the United States government?" His back straightened, stiff as a pole, expression as grave as a flag at half-mast. "The work we do here is of the highest importance, and I expect you to take it seriously."

Valerie slouched in her seat. Dante leaned back against the wall. The room quieted.

"Yes, Miss Ward," Melcher continued. "We were aware of the possibility that vampires might detect your blood type."

"Thanks for the heads up," Valerie said under her breath, grumbling.

"Most of the infected know little about their condition. Those who have managed to piece together the connection between blood type and vampirism likely know it requires a deadly disease to complete the process."

I wondered what would happen if I didn't have the antidote. Would I experience a sudden change? Cravings for blood… Well, already had those, but maybe it would be worse. It wasn't as if I'd have super strength or be able to fly. Vampirism was overrated, except maybe the part about eternal life. Not much of a super power if you asked me.

"Ours is an ever-evolving battle," Melcher said. "We do everything in our power to stay one step ahead of the enemy, but we cannot prevent them from figuring things out as time passes. Statistically, most vampires will have never tasted AB negative or positive blood since less than one percent of the

population has this type. Others who have been around long enough, unfortunately, are aware that a person with this blood type is either a vampire or has the potential to turn into a vampire."

"Why not kill these vampires if they know so much?" Dante asked.

My heart dropped. No matter what happened, I'd sooner stop breathing than let Fane die.

"No," Melcher said, surprising me. "They're far more valuable to me alive. We've already lost track of dozens of vampires since Marcus' departure."

Well, excuse me! Why did everyone act like I'd taken down the pope?

"Diederick has vast connections to the underworld. For now, we need him to coax his underlings out of the shadows."

King of the underworld. I doubted Diederick would be very happy if he knew our agency kept tabs on him in the interest of offing his so-called underlings.

"But we are getting off topic," Melcher said. "Dante secured a place on Diederick's VIP list when he attended one of these parties in Fairbanks last winter. We have paid his ticket for an all rooms access pass. He will be going undercover as a vampire."

Dante smiled and lifted his brows. He so did not look like a vampire.

From the frown on Valerie's face, I'd say she was thinking the same thing.

"Wait a minute," she said. "If Dante's going in as a vampire, will he be tasting these wine bimbos?"

"Dante will do what's necessary to maintain his cover," Melcher said.

Dante's grin widened. "The things I do for my country."

Shouldn't I be jealous that Dante would be sucking blood from an unspecified number of women? My anger at seeing Fane bite one woman had been enough to supercharge a rocket into space.

I hated to admit my first reaction to Dante's assignment was more around the lines of: No fair, how come he gets to drink blood?

"Oh, wow," Valerie said, smirking at Dante. "You just landed yourself the dream mission, Don Juan."

Dante's chest puffed up. "I'm not complaining."

Valerie lifted her chin. "What are Aurora and I supposed to do while Casanova samples the merchandise?"

"Valerie will gather names and start profiles of all the guests," Melcher said. "I want to know who goes inside the private rooms and who stays in the central area. Find out who works for Diederick—vampires and human. I want to know everything that happens at these events."

"What's my cover?" Valerie asked.

"You will be attending as Dante's girlfriend."

My jaw clenched. The green eyed monster reared her head on that one. Sucking off random working girls was one thing, but pretending to be a

couple with Valerie Ward made me see red, and I didn't mean the vixen's hair. If they kissed… so help me.

"Why can't I bring my real girlfriend?" Dante asked, walking behind my chair. He leaned forward, arms stretching over my shoulders, his hands on my armrests.

I'd seen a lot of frowns from Melcher this morning, but the one on his face now took the prize. I swore I saw pure malice in his eyes.

"Dante, Aurora," he said slowly. "Is there something I should be aware of?"

Valerie shot up in her seat, smiling deviously. "Yeah, is there something we should all be aware of?"

"Miss Ward," Melcher said in a warning tone.

Valerie pressed her lips together.

Melcher zoomed his questioning glare over to me. Why was this so awkward? Why did Dante have to go open his big mouth? Number one, I wasn't Dante's girlfriend. Number two, Melcher didn't need to know about our personal lives.

"As a matter of fact…" Dante began.

When I heard Dante's voice I suddenly found my own. "No," I said firmly. "Dante was just joking around."

I whipped my head around and glared at Dante. If he said otherwise I was going to smack him upside the head first chance I got.

Our eyes met. Dante's smile slowly neutralized. He retracted his arms and stepped aside. My expression must have conveyed my wishes loud and clear.

Melcher cleared his throat. "While I encourage teamwork in my department, I don't advise fraternizing outside of assignments. You can't let emotion cloud your judgment in the field. It could end up getting you or your partner killed." Melcher looked pointedly at Dante. "I don't need to remind you of what happened to Janine."

Dante resumed his position against the wall and folded his arms over his chest.

"As I was saying, Dante will attend the tasting part of the event and provide me with a full report on everything that happens in the private rooms. Meanwhile, Miss Ward, undercover as your female companion, will gather intel on every guest that goes in and out of the party."

That just left me. What part would Melcher make me play in Mission Tastings? I stared at him until he looked back. Out with it already.

"Agent Sky, I've saved the most important assignment for you."

Why didn't that reassure me?

Melcher's fingers formed a steeple. He smiled, which was more unnerving than his frown.

"I want you to get close to Diederick."

Of course Melcher wanted me to get close to Diederick. I'd taken down

Marcus and now Melcher had me pigeon holed as the hunter who went after the king of the castle. Extra credit for doing so well the last time. Freakin' great.

Valerie lifted her brows and smirked at me. Not a good sign. None of this was good. Valerie undercover as Dante's girlfriend, me getting cozy with Mr. Head Honcho—vamp in charge. Was it possible to call in sick? That one wouldn't work on Melcher. He knew illness, like pregnancy, was impossible. I ought to sue his organization for malpractice. Oh right, couldn't do that either.

"What do you mean by 'get close' to him?" I asked Melcher. That sounded like a job for an informant not a hunter.

He looked up as though reaching for the right wording. From the corner of my eye, Valerie made a fist and moved it back and forth in front of her mouth. Melcher missed it, looking skywards and all. So did Dante, who looked as intent as I felt, waiting for Melcher's answer.

"I mean keep an eye on him." All that thinking to say "Keep an eye on him"? Come on, Melcher, you can do better than that.

"I'm not asking you to do anything you're uncomfortable with, Aurora. I simply want you to befriend the man."

Not asking me to do anything I wasn't comfortable with? That was a laugh. Everything I did for Melcher made me uncomfortable. Even talking to Melcher made me uncomfortable.

"What if he wants to suck my blood?"

Seriously? He was putting the wrong person on this task. This job had Valerie's name written all over it in red ink.

Melcher looked me in the eyes.

"Tell him you're a vampire."

"What?" Valerie cried. "How come Aurora and Dante get to be vampires? The only thing those two know about vampires is how to kill them. I've made a career out of getting to know our subjects… intimately. Who better to pull off a she-vamp?"

Melcher cocked a brow. "Are you saying you're not up to your assignment, Miss Ward? Perhaps I should reassign the job to Miss Harper."

No! I sat straight up, gripping the chair's armrests. There's no way Noel Harper was playing boyfriend/girlfriend with Dante. Not again. Never again.

Valerie scowled. "You think that little ninny could do better than me? Fine, I'll go in as Dante's girlfriend and work the room. Strawberry cake walk."

"Excellent," Melcher said. "Now that that's settled I'd like to speak more with Aurora and Valerie. Dante, you're free to go."

"I'm Aurora's ride."

"I'm sure Miss Ward wouldn't mind taking Aurora home, would you, Miss Ward?" Melcher asked.

Valerie shrugged. "Not a problem."

Dante glanced from Melcher to me.

"It's fine," I said. "I'll see you later."

Dante frowned and lingered a moment longer before nodding stiffly and leaving Melcher's office.

"I'll call you," he said as he left.

Once Dante had gone, Melcher looked me in the eye. "It's easy to get close to the people we work with, but we have to keep our distance."

Is that why he acted so detached all the time? Melcher spoke from personal experience. He'd lost his partner, Agent Crist. Why would he put up with Jared if the vampire killed his partner? Did he really believe employing a vampire was for the greater good? How many recruits had he lost? What were my odds? Rather than asking, I simply nodded.

"Now that I have the two of you alone, I want to give you something."

Melcher pulled open a drawer behind his desk and lifted a metal cash box out, setting it on his desktop. Valerie stilled in her seat, eyes lighting up.

Now what?

Melcher unlocked the box with a key, making what felt like a slow show of pulling the lid back. With deliberate care, he counted out a stack of hundred dollar bills into two piles, five hundred dollars in each. He closed, locked, and set the cash box back in his desk drawer before giving it a slight slam shut.

It was almost comical the way Valerie's eyes latched onto the bills. Melcher pushed the stacks across his desk until they reached the edge.

"Here's five hundred dollars for each of you to buy several dresses. This isn't your typical house party. You'll need to dress up to blend in."

Valerie snatched the money, did a quick recount, picked her purse off the floor and dropped the bills inside.

"Unless you have something nice you can wear tonight, I suggest you two go shopping the moment we finish here. No more Goth wear, Miss Ward. I need you looking glamorous."

Valerie tossed her hair over her shoulder. "Now we're talking. Glamor is my middle name."

Someone looked a lot peppier. Nothing like a stack of Ben Franklins to motivate a woman. I took the money reluctantly, folded the bills in half, and stuffed the wad inside my jean pocket. Personally, I didn't like it. Get close to Diederick, take this cash, buy a dress… it all made me feel more like a hooker than an assassin.

"For now I want you to blend in and have Diederick get used to your presence," Melcher said. "As the intel comes in, I will instruct you on how to proceed. This is a nasty business we've stumbled upon, and I intend to shut down Diederick's operation before the year is out."

"What about the guests?" I asked. Sure, we could pull the plug on Tastings, but that wouldn't stop the vamps from seeking out alternative amusements.

Melcher placed his hands on his desk. "They will all have to die."

My stomach did a summersault.

"How do you propose we do that? They're going to notice if guests start dropping one by one."

"Don't worry about that for now. As I said, we need to gather information first. I want to know how many infected we're dealing with. Any more questions?"

"Nope," Valerie said, clutching her purse.

"Then you two are dismissed."

Valerie hopped out of her seat and headed for the door.

Melcher tapped the desk as I got up. "Aurora, before you go, I have one more thing I want to say to you. I don't want you drinking any blood at the party."

"Wouldn't dream of it," I said. Didn't mean I wouldn't think about it.

"Only if it's a last resort," Melcher said. "To maintain your cover."

Yeah, got it boss. I'd tried desperately to overcome my cravings during boot camp. Now all this talk about blood made my throat dry. It was Melcher's fault for injecting me with his virus cocktail and awakening all those dormant undead instincts floating around inside my DNA. Obviously, the antidote wasn't a suppressor. If I slipped up and drank blood, I blamed Melcher.

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7
Dressed for Suck-cess

After our meeting, Valerie bee-lined it to the Fifth Avenue Mall. She gunned it into town, leap frogging through traffic. At least she kept her eyes on the road and everyone else when she drove. Either she had the need for speed or was really excited to blow her wad of cash.

"We've got money to spend!" she squealed, cranking the wheel.

Once she'd circled her way up the mall's parking garage and nabbed a spot, she slipped her arm around mine, pulling me toward the sky bridge. This was a side of Valerie I'd never seen before. I followed her in and out of shops. We tried on dresses and modeled for one another. Valerie picked out most of my dresses. Every time I thought I'd found one I liked, she made me put it back, saying we needed to explore all our options first.

"Seriously, Val? I loved the last one. I don't see why I couldn't just buy it. Melcher said we'd need several."

Valerie was in such high spirits she either didn't notice, or didn't care, that I'd called her Val. Last time I did that, she'd practically bitten my head off.

Valerie wrinkled her nose. "The blue dress? You do not want to go to this thing in a blue dress. Go with red. It will compliment your hair. Red and black are classic, which is why I have my eye out for a little black dress."

I looked at the clock on my phone. "You do realize we have to find something before tonight?"

"Plenty of time. Now let's go check out Nordstrom."

It was in the Nordstrom dress department that Valerie finally gave her nod of approval on a long skirted, backless red dress. We stood outside the dressing room staring into the double mirrors, me in red, Valerie in black. She'd found a simple low cut black dress that didn't look so simple off the hanger, hugging her hourglass curves and bosom. I couldn't help wishing I was a little shapelier and less stick figure when I stood next to Valerie.

As though reading my thoughts, she lifted her chin and said, "Turn around."

I turned, back to the mirror.

"You should definitely go with the backless dress. Show off your slim shoulders and flawless skin."

Her compliment gave me the shivers—the good kind that made me lightheaded and tingly.

"Watch out vamps, the ginger queen is coming in," Valerie said to the mirror. She winked at her reflection.

I faced forward and gave a slight shake of my head. Before I could return

to the dressing room, Valerie called out, “Hold it. You still haven’t mentioned anything about a certain vampire hunter.”

“What?”

Valerie placed a hand on her hip. “Don’t play dumb with me. Obviously you hooked up with Dante, so how was he?”

Was this the equivalent of locker room talk?

“First of all, it’s none of your business. Secondly, it’s not like that. We’re friends.”

Valerie rolled her eyes. “I assume by your tone that means you haven’t screwed him yet.”

I glared.

Valerie smirked. “Scowl all you want, Aurora. You’re not in kindergarten anymore. You’re in college. So fuck him already.”

“God, you’re vulgar,” I said, before turning and storming into the dressing room.

I snapped the lock in place behind me. As I shimmied out of the dress, Valerie spoke through the wall of the room beside me.

“Let’s face it. You need all the help you can get. Think of me as the little red devil on your left shoulder whispering all the encouragement little Miss Boring Aurora Angel is too repressed to act on.”

I took a long look at myself in my undergarments in the mirror.

“I don’t need encouragement,” I said to the wall. “I need to do things at my own pace.”

“Snail’s pace,” Valerie said. “It’s time to make a decision. Do you want to crawl through life or do you want to soar? Take the leap. Trust me, Aurora, you’ll never look back.”

Life rules by Valerie Ward. No, thanks.

I’d just gotten home. I wasn’t like some sex starved inmate ready to jump the first available person after being released from prison. That was probably what Valerie did after boot camp.

I thought my feelings for Fane had died a thousand deaths until he showed up at my door and breathed life back into them. I definitely couldn’t discuss that with Valerie.

I wanted to believe Dante was the better choice, but in truth, neither of them were good for me. If I really wanted to reinvent myself, I should have a life outside of vampires and assassins. I should find a nice college boy.

Right, said a sarcastic voice inside my head. Because that worked out so well with Scott Stevens and Michael Peterson. Normal is not your thing. So who’s it going to be? The hunter or the hunted?

Or neither, I answered back. I’ve got a busy semester ahead of me. Boys are an unnecessary distraction.

Rather than respond, the voice simply laughed.

Once Valerie and I were dressed, we waited in line by the cash register with our new gowns. She leaned against me.

“Don’t let Melcher know you and Dante are going out. He’ll split you apart like kindling.” She made a chopping motion with her arm. “He doesn’t want us having relationships of any kind unless he orders it.”

My grip tightened on the dress hanger. “Melcher has no business sticking his nose into my private life.”

Valerie chuckled. “Yeah, good luck with that. The man thinks he has full ownership over us. Just play along and keep quiet. What Melcher doesn’t know won’t kill him. Too bad Andre Morrel isn’t around any longer. If he really did kill Crist, maybe he could have taken care of Melcher next.”

I glanced around the department store, but we were the only ones around and the cashier had the phone cradled between her ear and as she wrote on a piece of scratch paper.

“Except that it was Jared who killed Crist,” I reminded Valerie.

“Andre had her cross.”

“No, Jared had her cross.”

“Whatever,” Valerie said, rolling her eyes. “The point is neither of us wants to be under Melcher’s thumb. The bastard hired Jared to attack and recruit candidates like us. No way Melcher’s not in on that. Probably gave the orders himself. I always knew that guy was fucked in the head. If I find out he sent Jared after me, he’s dead. Jared first. Then Melcher. Once those two bite the dust, I’m out of here for good.”

Valerie stepped in front of me and set the black dress on the cashier’s counter, tapping her foot until the woman hung up the phone.

I’d spent many sleepless nights at boot camp pondering the same thoughts. Just how involved was Melcher in the unit’s unsavory recruitment methods? Like Valerie, I had a hard time believing Jared operated independent of Melcher’s instructions.

It only led to more questions.

Why would Melcher do something so malicious? I thought his entire purpose was eradicating evil. He certainly preached his intentions to rid the world of vampires with conviction. Were his beliefs fanatical enough to justify attacking and enslaving his own personal army?

Who was really in charge, and why in God’s name had they given Melcher command of his own unit?

What made Melcher so neurotic? Why did he hate vampires so much? Had one killed his family? Something had to have happened. How could I find out?

“Now let’s get shoes,” Valerie said, heading for the escalators once I finished paying for my dress.

Apparently shopping was her happy place. It wasn’t as easy for me to jump back and forth between the dark place and the light. I didn’t know if a sunny place existed within myself any longer. Maybe that place was off limits to assassins… at least ones with a conscience.

From the moment Valerie stepped onto the carpeted area of the women’s

shoe department, she had a sales clerk rushing back and forth with black heels of various heights and styles.

"Find anything yet?" Valerie asked as she slipped on her fifth pair of heels.

"Most of these shoes have heels," I said, picking a sleek red pump off a display across from Valerie as a visual aid.

Valerie shot me one of her "duh" looks, not bothering to roll her eyes.

"I had to wear stilettos on my last assignment," I said, setting the shoe down. "Complete hindrance, not to mention uncomfortable as hell."

"You get used to it," Valerie said, standing. She strutted across the carpet to a mirror propped against a wall.

"I don't want to get used to it."

I might not be soaring through life, but I certainly didn't want to stumble. Comfort beat looks any day of the week. Life lessons according to Aurora Sky.

While Valerie admired her legs in the mirror, the saleslady asked if she could get me anything in my size. In the end, I found a pair of nude flats. The hem on the dress practically reached the floor. Not like I'd be showing off my footwear, so might as well be as comfortable as I could. Even the flats were stiff and poked my skin around the edge.

I glanced at the time on my cell phone.

"We should go," I said.

"I want to try on perfume first," Valerie replied, already on her way to the perfume counter.

She picked up a pink bottle, sprayed the air, sniffed, and moved onto the next.

My chest lifted into a deep sigh. Moments like these were almost enough to make me pick up driving again.

After passing the air test, Valerie sprayed one of the perfumes directly onto her skin and rubbed her wrists together.

A clerk walked over and smiled at Valerie. "Euphoria is one of my favorites. I love the seductive scent of exotic fruits and rich florals." She leaned in closer. "I swear it messes with my man's head. Anytime I put it on, the compliments come rolling in. He can't keep his eyes or hands off me."

Oh, please. It was perfume, not liquid aphrodisiac. But Valerie ate it up, laughing along with the scent expert.

I tapped my foot against the floor.

"I'll take a bottle," Valerie said. Then, looking at me, "So will she."

The clerk smiled and started to turn.

My foot stilled. "No I won't."

"Come on, Aurora. Dante will love it."

"Dante doesn't care what I smell like."

Okay, as long as I didn't smell like BO. No one liked that smell. But having a clean non-smell was good enough. I doubted Dante would like a high

maintenance woman. He was too practical for that, besides which, I didn't want to mess with his head.

Valerie shrugged. "It's your call. Just don't complain tonight if he can't keep his eyes off me after getting a whiff of Euphoria."

The clerk raised her eyebrows at me.

I grabbed the display bottle off the counter and spritzed my wrists.

"There," I said. "Now we'll both smell like Euphoria tonight."

Valerie rolled her eyes before handing over a one hundred dollar bill to the sale clerk.

Just when I thought we'd finally be free of the department store, a pair of chandelier earrings caught Valerie's eye.

Valerie stopped in place. "Oh my gosh, I have to have those earrings."

"Do those go with your dress?" I asked.

"Who cares? I want them."

She rushed to the nearest cash register as if I was going to chase her down and make her put them back. Someone had a shopping problem. I'm not sure this was what Melcher intended when he forked over a grand. Evidently, it was burning a hole in Valerie's pocket.

Suppressing a sigh, I turned a spinning rack with silver pendants.

"Aurora!" Valerie called from the register. "I need to borrow twelve dollars."

Had she already blown through half a grand? Big surprise. I handed Valerie one of my twenties.

"Thanks," she said, snatching it from my fingers.

At least with her money spent, we could get going. I was shopped out and in the mood for a quiet evening on the couch watching a movie—not batting my lashes at Diederick.

I returned to the jewelry counter and began trying on stretch bracelets.

"Aurora?"

A young woman's voice broke through the retail fog that had settled over my brain. Not Valerie's voice. Someone familiar, yet hazy.

I looked up to find Denise—my former best friend from Denali High—staring at me in equal surprise.

"Wow, it is you," she said.

Who did she think it was? My evil vampire hunting twin?

Denise and I hadn't parted on good terms, so I wasn't in the mood for all the phony baloney, "we-used-to-be-friends" bit.

Our friendship had started slipping even before my car accident. The first indication came after I got accepted into Notre Dame, and Denise reacted like a jealous banshee. A real friend would have been happy for me. To top it off, after I nearly died, she turned a cold shoulder on me when I returned to school withdrawn. I didn't have any friends until Noel, Whitney, and Hope took me in. Thinking about it made me sad. Sadder than I'd ever felt with Denise. With Noel, I'd lost a true friend. A friend I would have loved to room with if

she hadn't invited Fane to join her in the October room at the palace.

"Hey, what are you doing here?" I asked.

I wouldn't have expected to see Denise in Anchorage the second week of September. Most universities started at the end of August.

Her nose lifted in a very "I'm important and superior" gesture.

"I got into UCLA. The quarter doesn't begin for another two weeks. Just doing some school shopping with my mom before I make my way down to California."

Guess it was my turn to be jealous. Denise didn't know how lucky she was to attend school in the golden state. It wasn't just about the on-campus college experience, but something far more important. Freedom. The freedom to make her own choices and go wherever she wanted. I envied that.

This was the experience we'd been looking forward to since sophomore year. At least one of us got to follow her dreams.

"That's great," I said. "I've heard UCLA is really good."

Denise shot me a flippant smile.

"It's not Yale, but at least it's not in-state. So what about you, Aurora? Shouldn't you be at Notre Dame?"

"I'm going to UAA."

Denise's eyes widened by a couple centimeters. "But… why?"

I shrugged. "I've had a lot to deal with, and I decided to stick around."

"Sorry," Denise said, the superior look returning at warp speed. "That sucks."

This was never my dream scenario, but she didn't have to say sticking around sucked. Before I could respond, Valerie pushed against me. Her shoulder leaned into mine so hard I nearly stumbled sideways.

"You know what sucks? Living on campus sucks," Valerie said, glaring her signature death ray at Denise. "Aurora and I have our own house. Tonight we've been invited to party with the city's wealthiest bachelors. So have fun hanging out in your jammies in your sucky dorm room." With that, Valerie tossed her hair over her shoulder and grabbed my arm. "Come on, Aurora. We have more shopping to do."

Couldn't have worded it better myself.

Once we were out of earshot I said, "That was awesome."

With a smug smile Valerie said, "Did you see the look on her face? Didn't see the red fury coming. I can't stand bitches who think they're above everyone else."

Something like compassion pulled on my heartstrings at that moment as the most unlikely thought entered my head. Valerie Ward wasn't half bad.

Having a friend stick by me felt good. I could get used to this side of Valerie.

She gave my arm a tug. "Let's get free makeovers at Sephora. Then all we have to do is get dressed and do our hair."

"Why not?" I said, matching her step into the mall.

By the time we were finished with our makeovers, we only had an hour to get ready. Suddenly, Valerie went into freak-out mode.

"An hour!" she cried behind the wheel, zooming towards mid-town. "There's no way I can drop you off, do my hair and makeup, and get back to your place in time."

"Makeup?" I asked, frowning. "We just had makeovers."

"Yeah, but she smudged the liner on my right eye." Valerie sat up, practically touching her face to the review mirror.

I kept my eyes on the road ahead.

"It looks fine to me."

"You should come over while I get dressed," Valerie said. "It will save me ten minutes if I don't have to drop you off first."

"No way! Then I won't have any time to get ready."

Valerie waved a hand at me. "Your makeup looks fine and you have your dress and shoes with you. I'm making an executive decision." She abruptly pulled out of a turn only lane, cutting off a car on the right.

They honked. Valerie flipped them off.

Valerie sped down Minnesota Boulevard toward Denali High—my old stomping grounds. Driving around that area gave me a weird sense of déjà vu. High school felt like ages ago, especially after boot camp, which had seemed unending.

As we passed Denali High, Valerie looked over, smirk on her face, and said, "Losers."

About four minutes later, she pulled up to a brown, single-story house in a middle class neighborhood. So this was where Valerie Ward nested.

There were lights on inside. I followed Valerie inside. A middle-aged woman with brown, shoulder-length hair sat on a couch with cushions that looked like they were upholstered in burlap sacks. She ate a frozen dinner from a TV tray while watching what sounded like a British melodrama on TV.

The living room opened up to a small kitchen with mustard-yellow appliances.

"Aurora, Kennick. Kennick, Aurora," Valerie said, walking in front of the TV toward a darkened hallway. "Kennick's a staffer." Valerie rolled her eyes while her back was to the woman.

"Aurora," the woman repeated, looking me over. "You're a VH."

Vampire hunter.

"That's correct," I said. I wasn't sure what else to say. Nice to meet you? I could see why Valerie was excited to hang out at my place. I wanted as little to do with Melcher and his staff as possible, and Valerie had to live with one of them.

"Why are you here?" the woman asked.

"Because she's my lesbian lover," Valerie said. "Chill, Kennick. We're on assignment. Big chief's orders."

Kennick frowned. "You know I don't appreciate that attitude."

Valerie waved a hand in the air. "Whatever. Come on, Aurora. Time to get pretty."

I hurried after her down the hall. It wasn't as if I wanted to hang out with Kennick any longer than necessary. The hallway appeared extra dark with the floor to ceiling wood paneling.

Valerie pulled me into her room and shut the door. I must have been giving her a look.

"What?" she demanded.

I shook my head. "This is dreary."

Valerie rolled her eyes. "Tell me about it. See why I fled? I have to remind myself why I came back every day just to keep from blowing my brains out over her shag carpet." She fished a pack of cigarettes out of her purse, pulled one out, and lit up.

"Kennick lets you smoke inside?"

"Yeah, right." Valerie moved across the room to the window and slid it open.

I never pictured Valerie under house arrest. How could I not be sympathetic?

"This here builds character," Valerie said, waving her cigarette around the room. "Not everyone's born with a silver spoon. One day, when I'm rich, biographers will look back on my life and write about the way Valerie Ward rose up out of nothing and made something of herself."

"Inspiring," I said, half-joking.

"Damn right it's inspiring," Valerie said. She took a drag on her cigarette and blew a cloud of smoke toward the open window. "My life is blockbuster material. Beautiful young woman attacked in L.A. alleyway. Kidnapped and forced to kill vampires in Alaska. Trained as an assassin. Sent into the underworld undercover. Almost killed a second time by the same psycho who stabbed her in L.A." Ash fell to the carpet as Valerie moved her cigarette around. "And like every great story, mine includes romance—a tale of seduction, heartbreak, and betrayal."

"This is fiction we're talking about, right?"

The faraway look on Valerie's face was replaced by a wretched scowl.

"You don't know a god damn thing, Aurora Sky."

"Oh really? What about blackmail? Does your biography include that chapter of your life?"

I'd been willing to move past that. Not many people would. If Valerie kept milking the sob story about her love affair with Fane, she'd have to own up to her dirty side. Fane didn't betray her, he broke up with her—though I was sure they were one and the same in Valerie's mind.

My Fane story was much more tragic than hers. Vampire hunter falls in

love with vampire, is blackmailed into breaking up with him, and later finds him with best friend. Top that, Valerie Ward! She acted like she was the only agent to have ever been wronged. Just because I didn't want to sell the rights to my life story didn't mean I hadn't suffered, too.

"That's called payback," Valerie said. "You're lucky I gave you an option. I could have done a lot worse."

She'd already tried when she reported me to Melcher—saying she suspected I'd recently joined the vampire race. She probably wanted one of Melcher's assassins to take me out. Too bad for her I was one of those assassins. That was the moment we discovered we worked for the same boss.

And this crazy bitch wanted me to give her a key to my house? I'd sooner set out a "Vampires Welcome" mat.

"You give yourself far too much credit," I said. "I was about to break up with him before you blackmailed me."

"Yeah, right," Valerie said, rolling her eyes.

Everything had changed when I found out Fane was a vampire. After that, I knew dating him was a bad idea. I'd pulled back, but at the same time I couldn't stay away… not until Valerie forced me to. Even that didn't work.

Only Fane could keep me away.

"Not a good idea," he'd said the night I tried to make a move inside his car.

The thing that hurt the most was he'd been right. The two of us would never be a good idea, and nothing could change that.

At least there were killer vampires to distract me.

"Let's get dressed and spy on some ritzy vampires already," I said, more than ready to change the subject and move on.

Valerie held her glare two more seconds before relaxing into a sultry smile. She grabbed an empty iced tea bottle off her windowsill, unscrewed the lid, and tossed the cigarette inside.

"The room's all yours. I gotta redo my makeup."

After Valerie disappeared into the hallway, I pulled my dress out of the shopping bag and snapped the tag off. I dressed in front of a small mirror above Valerie's armoire, finger-combing my long, black hair once I'd finished.

It was a beautiful dress, long and elegant. I turned back and forth and looked around Valerie's room while I waited. She'd done a good job of updating the room with stylish décor. There was a modern black and powder-blue theme going on with her bedspread, throw pillows, curtains, and matching window valance.

Decorative picture frames in silver, light blue, and black were interspersed with accent pieces on two wall shelves above her bed. Leaning in for a closer look, I saw that none of the frames held personal pictures. They were all postcards, mostly black and white. One of the Eiffel Tower. Another the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Between each frame was a statue of some kind: a

meditating monk, an owl made of gems, a silver heart, a glass swirl, and a miniature rocking horse.

A framed black and white poster of Marilyn Monroe hung to the left of the shelves.

I sat on the edge of the bed and texted Valerie's address to Dante. Even if I wasn't his girlfriend on assignment, I still needed a ride to the party, which meant "tagging" along with the happy couple. I sighed and tried not to think too much about tonight. More vampires. Just what I wasn't in the mood for.

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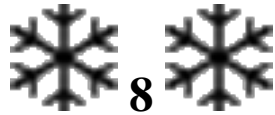

8
The Lodge

The red queen finally returned freshly powdered, hair full of bounce.

She looked me over.

"You cannot wear your hair down with a backless dress. Come over here, and I'll get you fixed up."

While I stood in front of the mirror, Valerie ran her fingers through my hair, combing through the silky strands before gathering it all up and twisting it into a bun. She grabbed a jeweled hair stick off her armoire, stuck it in, and stepped back.

"Perfect."

I turned my head to the side. Surprising how fancy my hair looked after a quick twist and stick.

"It looks nice. Thanks."

"You're welcome."

Luckily, Valerie was much quicker changing clothes than she was with her hair and makeup. My phone dinged as she slipped into her heels.

"Dante's outside."

"I call front," Valerie said. Noticing my frown she said, "I'm his date to this thing."

I inhaled and released my breath slowly.

"Fine."

"Great. Let's go."

Dante whistled when Valerie and I climbed into the Jeep.

"Looking good, ladies."

Valerie fluffed her hair forward.

"And you smell great, too."

Valerie turned in her chair to shoot me a smug "told you so" smile. Yeah, well, I didn't have to pay sixty-six dollars to smell good for one night.

Dante headed south toward the mountains.

"Now that we're all together, I think it's time to switch assignments," Valerie said. "Let's face it, if anyone's going to ensnare Diederick it's me. Aurora's better off with Dante. The two of you won't have to pretend."

Fine by me. Melcher didn't need to know, and I'd rather play the girlfriend than temptress any day. Melcher had really miscast us.

"Or…" Dante said. "You can both be my girls."

Valerie snorted. "You wish."

Dante shrugged. I couldn't see his face from the backseat, but I was sure his mouth had formed a big 'ol grin. "Baby—" he belted out suddenly. It took me a moment to realize he was going into song. Oh, boy.

When Dante hit the second verse of his spontaneous song, he started into lyrics about him with two woman at the same time.

Valerie squealed suddenly and clapped her hands. “Oh my god! Is that Simultaneous Lovin’ from South Park?”

Dante repeated the chorus back in answer, shaking his shoulders side to side as he drove. Valerie joined him in the song, shaking her own body while I rolled my eyes from the back seat.

Valerie threw her hands up in the air and waved them around.

Dante leaned toward her singing, “You and me…”

“And her,” Valerie said tilting her head my way.

“Simultaneously,” they sang together.

“You and me,” Valerie sang again.

“And you and you and you,” Dante answered.

Valerie screeched with laughter, banging her arm on the console between her and Dante. Like he needed any more encouragement.

“Oh my god, I’m crying,” Valerie said. “If you ruin my makeup you are so dead.”

Which reminded me, we weren’t out for a joy ride or Saturday night out on the town. This was a mission. I couldn’t blame Dante or Valerie for goofing around and blowing off steam. I wish I could let loose more, get my mind off tonight’s task. Heck, get my mind off everything. What was the point of stressing? Once completed, there would be another mission to take its place. An endless parade of assignments and killing sprees. Thoughts like this made it hard for me to cut loose and laugh.

“I wonder what kind of music they’ll have at this thing,” Valerie mused.

“Fancy music,” Dante said.

“And let me guess, hors d’oeuvres?”

“Fancy ones.”

Valerie snorted.

“You and Aurora should stick together,” Dante said, turning his head until our eyes met. “I don’t know how much of you I’ll see while I’m in the private tasting rooms.”

The familiar flutter inside my chest picked up. Didn’t matter how many assignments I went on. I always got stressed right before game time. Should have joined the sing along. Might have helped.

“Don’t worry about us, Don Juan,” Valerie said.

“It feels funny going on a no-kill mission,” Dante said. “Been getting a lot of these lately, but I guess this is normal for you.”

Valerie straightened in her seat. “Speak for yourself. I started out as an informant and now Melcher has me killing vampires left and right. I took care of those three pizza boy killers and the Morrel family in Sitka.”

“Actually, Jared killed the Morrels while we ran for our lives. Not all of the Morrels are dead,” I reminded her.

“Thanks to you,” she said. “I don’t know how I let her talk me into

sparing Vampire Barbie. Should have left her for Jared. Better yet, should have shot her myself."

"Is this woman dangerous?" Dante asked.

Valerie pushed her hair back with a flick of her wrist. "She's a woman. Of course she's dangerous."

"I have a bad feeling about her," I said.

Valerie's body stilled. An instant later, she whipped around, and shot me a death glare. "Oh, so now you have a bad feeling about her? Little late for that, don't you think?"

"Ladies, let's not fight before the party," Dante said, chuckling.

Valerie turned around.

"What about you, Dante? Would you have allowed Giselle Morrel to live?"

"She's a vampire?"

"One hundred percent."

"I would have killed her."

"See, even Dante would kill a pretty woman if she was a vampire," Valerie said, sounding vindicated. "Not only did Miss Bleeding Heart allow her to live, she dragged her to safety. And I do mean literally dragged."

Dante glanced at me in the review mirror.

"You rescued a vampire? Why?"

My bottom lip puffed out. The truth was I had no good answer. I panicked. I'd just discovered that Jared was a vampire and witnessed him snap Henriette Morrel's neck. I crawled away as he struggled with Andre Morrell, but I'd heard the shot from upstairs. Then the second shot when he came upstairs and finished off Etienne Morrel next.

"S'il vous plaît ne blessez pas les enfants."

I could still hear Henriette's final words in my head.

Please don't hurt the children.

It had been too late for the boy, but I had a chance to save the girl. Saving a person, even a vampire, felt a lot more natural than killing them.

I didn't want to be an assassin. I didn't want to kill vampires. That wouldn't ever change, and here I was, forced into killing vampires until Melcher stopped giving the orders.

Valerie made a valid point at the mall. Both he and Jared needed to go. But taking down the man in charge? I couldn't begin to figure that one out. Did we hire a vampire to go after him? If it all went wrong and Melcher found out, we were deader than undead.

Better to take one thing at a time, and that began with Jared.

I met Dante's eyes in the mirror.

"I rescued Giselle because Jared was after her. If a vampire that malicious wanted her dead, I figured it might be a good reason to keep her alive."

Dante squinted at me. He wasn't convinced.

Valerie surprised me by saying, “Now that’s thinking I can begin to understand.”

“Aside from being a vampire, remind me again why Jared’s so bad,” Dante said. “According to Melcher, he’s on our side.”

“He tried to kill us,” I said, voice rising. Twice!

“You mean literally? Why would he do that?”

“Because he’s a psychopath,” Valerie snapped. “And, yeah, he literally came after us with an ax.”

Dante’s eyes shot back to me in the mirror.

“An ax? You didn’t mention an ax, Aurora.”

“I only saw you once between crisis number one and crisis number two, and it’s not exactly something I’d bring up at dinner with my mother and grandmother present.”

Little did I know that would be the last time I’d see Dante for six months. Fate had other plans. Marcus. All kills were awful, but he’d been the worst. I’d known Marcus personally… as much as you can get to know an eccentric socialite.

The battle to the death inside his music room had also been one of the scariest apart from initiation. Music to die by. I never wanted to go through something like that again. I’d scope out party guests and keep an eye on Diederick any day of the week over an assassination.

“Jared’s lucky he fell off the radar,” Dante said. “Better not show his face anywhere near either of you, or I’ll take him out. He’s a vampire. I have every right to end him regardless of Melcher’s orders. I’ll say it was self-defense.”

“Jared’s mine,” Valerie said.

I leaned forward. “You have to find him first.”

Valerie pursed her lips. “I’m sure he’ll rear his evil face soon enough.”

The thought of seeing Jared again quickened the tempo of my already racing heart. The base of the mountains loomed closer as the Jeep rushed forward. Dante cranked the steering wheel, winding up a series of hairpin turns; climbing, climbing, climbing our way up the hillside.

The houses here had to cost a pretty penny. Forget McMansions, these were more like mini chateaus with custom stonework, towering A-frames, and enough property to set the neighbors apart by several acres.

And I thought the palace had been ritzy.

“How come rich people always live on hills?” I wondered aloud.

“So they can look down at the peasants,” Dante answered.

“For the view,” Valerie said.

I scooted forward, staring between the front seats through the windshield. The lights of Anchorage winked to life as the Jeep climbed higher.

“Beautiful,” Valerie said wistfully.

“Okay, it should be coming up soon,” Dante said.

My heart beat its way into my throat, making me want to gag. Once again, I wished I could be more gung ho. These days I watched how much I

drank, but I swore there were times I wanted to down five shots of tequila to calm my shaky nerves.

"Here!" Valerie said, pointing at a paved road between two stone posts. Did she have to sound so excited?

I couldn't help thinking she and Dante would make a better couple than Dante and me. They were both action junkies. They even synchronized their chorus. No doubt Valerie would give Dante a run for his money in the bedroom. Then again, they might kill each other first.

As Dante curved along the drive leading to the looming house, his speed slowed. He came to a stop in front of a wide set of stone steps leading to double doors with oval frosted glass windows.

"Where do we park?" Dante wondered aloud.

We'd entered a circular driveway, not the kind of place to pull aside and leave a vehicle. There weren't any other cars around, but they had to be somewhere. A hidden parking lot?

We'd only been stopped a couple seconds before a middle aged man in a tuxedo emerged from the house. He moved down the stairs gracefully and walked over to the driver's side window, which Dante rolled down.

The gentleman crouched, sharing a view of his balding head.

"Good evening, sir, and ladies. Your name please?"

"Dante."

"Yes, of course. Diederick has a fine selection for you this evening, sir. And who are your friends?"

"My girlfriend and her friend," Dante answered.

"Very good. The ladies may wait for you in the rec room. We have a fine selection of hors d'oeuvres, cocktails, and wine."

"And the ladies will be left alone?"

"You needn't worry. Diederick does not allow shenanigans at his events. Now if you step out, I will park your vehicle for you, sir."

Dante glanced at me over his shoulder and lifted his eyebrows before stepping out. Valerie and I followed suit. Goose bumps rose over my bare arms when I stepped into the night air.

"Please continue inside. Foster will greet you in the foyer."

"This is totally weird," I said as we walked up the stairs.

"Swanky, I told you," Dante replied.

Valerie's lips formed a pout. "How am I supposed to meet anyone if they've been instructed not to bother other guests?"

Personally, I found that reassuring. If vampires felt they had to leave me alone, all the better.

"I'm sure we can still mingle," I said.

Dante pulled open the door. "After you, ladies."

Valerie walked in first. As I stepped over the threshold, Dante grabbed my ass and gave it a squeeze. I whipped around, "Dante!"

He held up his hands. "What? You're my girlfriend."

Valerie rolled her eyes. “Oh, please. Get a room. Wait, they’re all taken.”

I glared at her. Thanks for reminding me.

A man, Foster presumably, stood still as a statue, waiting for us in the foyer. He was around the same age as the first guy, but with considerably more hair, including a mustache.

“Welcome,” he said, arms clasped behind his back. “Your name, sir?”

Dante looked at me and smirked. I could tell he was trying not to laugh. Straight-faced, he turned to Butler Number Two.

“Dante.”

“Very good. And your friends?”

“Girlfriend. Friend.” Dante said, motioning at each of us. “The other guy said they wouldn’t be bothered while I’m off sampling.”

“Indeed, they will be perfectly comfortable,” Foster said straightening. “There are hors d’oeuvres and wine in the rec room. I will take you there first, after which you may begin your tasting.”

Dante nodded once. “Perfect.”

Valerie took the lead as we were led through a lodge-like living room with a tall ceiling. Aside from a few muted lamps, the upper floor of the house was dim. I wasn’t sure what to call the place. The term “palace” had belonged to Marcus. The Lodge? The Mansion? The Château?

I fell behind as I looked around.

“You look beautiful,” Dante whispered in my ear.

Before I could thank him, he added, “The only thing I’m going to be thinking about when I bite those other women is you.”

Ruin the moment, why didn’t he? It was aggravating, but hard to get mad at the same time. It was obvious Dante thought he’d paid me a compliment.

I sighed. Now was not the time or place to smack him.

“Will you be okay?” he asked a second later.

“Apparently I have nothing to worry about.”

“That’s a relief,” Dante said. “I think tonight we play it safe. Like the valet said, no shenanigans.”

I snorted softly. “You just wanted to say the word shenanigans.”

“Shenanigans,” Dante repeated and winked. “Some party, right?”

“We’ll see.”

Foster and Valerie waited by a staircase leading downstairs.

“You two coming?” Valerie demanded.

“Right behind you,” I said.

“The rec room is below,” Foster said. “You will find it very comfortable. Once you are ready, Dante, I will escort you to the private rooms, where you will find a nice selection of Bordeaux.”

Gross. I wrinkled my nose. Just because these blood suckers were biting women in style didn’t make it any less disgusting.

There was a pool room at the bottom of the stairs with three separate tables. Two were occupied. The players kept their eyes on the game as Foster

led us through the room into another much larger area—the rec room I presumed.

Harp strings filled my ears with a lulling melody. An actual harpist sat in the corner stroking her instrument. There were about thirty guests milling around the room, holding onto wine glasses. A fire roared in a hearth near the window. Plush arm chairs were positioned around it. Maybe I would call this place The Lodge after all.

Against another wall, there was a full bar stocked with liquor and wine on glass shelves behind the polished dark wood counter.

"Fancy," Valerie murmured. Her brows furrowed, as though worried, but the look was quickly replaced with a calculated "I'm queen bee" glare leveled at all the guests in the room.

"Come with me," Foster said. "I will announce you to Diederick."

I pressed against Dante's arm and whispered, "Which one is Diederick?"

Dante lifted his chin toward the back of the room.

"Man sitting on the antique armchair with a woman standing on either side of him."

The man Dante indicated looked to be in his early thirties. He wore a fitted suit, no tie, and had thick brown hair that curled slightly at the ends, nearly touching his shoulders. Dark facial hair had been neatly trimmed close to the skin of his upper lip and chin. He held a glass of red wine in his left hand. The wineglass seemed gigantic for the little amount of wine inside, but what did I know? I wasn't even at the legal drinking age yet.

Foster led us straight up to Diederick.

"Sir, Dante has arrived for his first tasting. This is his girlfriend and a friend."

Diederick smiled slightly at Dante. "Pleasure to see you again. I hope this evening's experience will be satisfactory."

"I'm sure it will be," Dante said.

"You are welcome to as much pure wine as you like, or Foster can escort you to the tasting rooms at once. The ladies must remain down here, but may drink and amuse themselves however they wish."

Diederick barely glanced at Valerie or me. Business and wine clearly interested him more than women. Good luck, Val. Naturally she noticed, too, and her frown showed she wasn't pleased.

"Thank you," Dante said. "I'll join the ladies for a drink before I head up. Little warm up beverage." Dante chuckled.

Diederick simply answered, "Enjoy."

As we stepped away from the man in charge, Foster said, "I will be in the foyer when you are ready, sir."

The harpist stopped playing, leaving only the soft din of guests speaking in low voices.

This felt really awkward. What exactly were Valerie and I supposed to do while we waited for Dante? Listen and observe people drinking wine?

Taste some and comment on its oaky flavor? Try to mingle with complete strangers?

Boot camp had not prepared me for this.

Once we were out of earshot of Diederick and Foster, I whispered, "Now what?"

"Now we get a drink," Valerie said.

We crossed the room to the bar. The harpist took a seat at the far end. The bartender handed her a bottle of water before coming over to ask what we'd like.

"White Russian," Valerie said.

Leave it to Valerie to order a cocktail at a wine party.

Dante wasn't any better.

"Got any beer?" he asked.

"Light or dark?"

Dante leaned against the oak counter. "Let's do dark."

"We have a Belgium Rodenbach that is quite nice. Slightly sour at first, but that fades into a well-balanced robust flavor with hints of sherry."

Dante nodded. "Sounds good to me."

Sounded fancy for a beer.

"And you, Miss?" the bartender asked me.

"I'll have water, please."

"Very good."

"Water?" Valerie asked, wrinkling her nose when the bartender turned away. He walked to a mini fridge at the far end of the bar. The harpist sipped on her water behind him.

"We're trying to blend in, not raise suspicion," Valerie said under her breath.

"What's suspicious about drinking water? Maybe I'm the designated driver."

Valerie snorted rudely. "You don't drive."

"Good point. One of you needs to stop after your first drink." I looked between Dante and Valerie.

"I have a high tolerance for alcohol," Dante said. "And the tastings are just that, a small taste. Besides," he said, brushing his hand across my neck. "I'd never do anything that might cause you harm."

"Touching," Valerie said, rolling her eyes. "Fine. One drink. I'll drive us home. But you really ought to get over your car phobia, since you don't like to drink anyway." Valerie jabbed her finger in my direction.

I gave a noncommittal shrug. I didn't see any rush, especially when I lived within walking distance of campus and had a friend with wheels. Besides, it was fall, which lasted about a week in Anchorage. Meaning winter, ice, and snow were right around the corner.

If I were to get behind the wheel again, it would be at the beginning of summer.

"You know the longer you put off driving, the more you let Jared win," Valerie said.

Dante tilted his head. "What does Jared have to do with Aurora not driving?"

"Nothing," I said, glaring at Valerie. "He recruited me after my accident. Thinks I'm weak for not getting behind the wheel again."

Dante did not need to know about Jared's recruiting methods. He'd call him out in five seconds flat. Not only would Valerie and I lose the element of surprise, but Dante might get himself killed. Jared was a blood sucker. A cold-hearted killer. Dante would endanger all our lives if he went after him. After Jared was dead, I'd tell Dante everything.

"I can't stand that guy," Dante said.

The bartender set a White Russian in front of Valerie and a bottle of water and a glass in front of me. He unscrewed the lid on the bottle and filled my glass halfway before going back to the fridge. A moment later, he was back with a frosted pint glass and black bottle that looked like champagne. He uncorked the bottle and filled the glass.

"Cheers, man," Dante said, lifting the glass to his mouth. His lips puckered when he set the glass down. "Wow, my tongue's tingling."

"Lovely, isn't it?" the bartender asked.

"Yeah, that's some good stuff."

The bartender moved onto a man who'd stepped up beside Dante. Dante took several delicate sips before lifting the bottle to examine the label. The liquid inside the glass was really dark, not the kind a person could easily guzzle down.

"Two thousand and nine vintage," Dante read aloud. "Talk about flavor. I could get used to this. Nothing but the best."

Valerie brushed a stray curl back and sipped her cocktail, eyes roaming the room.

I drank my plain old boring water.

"Want a taste?" Dante asked, pushing the glass toward me.

"No, thanks."

"Come on. Just one sip."

"Only so you'll stop asking." I took a sip… and tried not to spit it back into the glass. My nostrils flared. I swear I smelled balsamic vinegar. "That's disgusting."

Dante shook his head. "No appreciation."

I pushed the glass his way. "Take it back. Even the smell is overpowering."

"Shouldn't you be getting to your tasting?" Valerie asked Dante.

She kept looking around the room as though she were searching for someone.

"When the beer's gone, I'm gone." Dante took another sip.

Valerie raised a brow. "Getting cold feet, Casanova?"

“Au contraire. My feet are hot to trot.”

Valerie stopped scanning the room and rolled her eyes. Dante downed the rest of the beer and set the empty glass on the counter, smacking his lips. “Ahh. That was one fine drink my friends, but now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got some blood to suck.”

Dante shot me a lopsided grin right before planting a wet, vinegar-scented kiss over my lips. He hopped off the stool, gave Valerie and me a salute, and headed out of the rec room. I watched him walk away with perfect ease and confidence.

“I hope he can pull this off,” I whispered for only Valerie to hear.

“All he has to do is lick blood off a bunch of willing women,” Valerie said, clearly unimpressed. “How hard can it be?” Valerie squinted at me. “You’re being surprisingly cool about this. Assignment or not, if that was my man sucking on a bunch of hoochies, I’d want to rip his tongue out.”

Except Dante wasn’t exactly my man.

I stared at Valerie a moment. Her lips puffed out as she shot me the stink eye. I suppose I should’ve counted myself lucky the vixen merely blackmailed me into dumping Fane rather than taking other actions—such as dismemberment.

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9
An Unusual Suspect

Several whimsical notes passed over the room like a gentle wave as the harpist resumed playing. Guess a DJ would've been out of place. I didn't feel overdressed any longer. The women had on pearl necklaces, and diamonds winking from their ears.

There wasn't any place for a pendant with my dress, which covered my chest and tied at the neck. I tugged at one of my earrings gently.

Valerie heaved a sigh. "All the important guests are probably in the rooms upstairs."

I wasn't sure. This crowd looked pretty Who's Who to me. When I didn't answer, Valerie went back to sipping her cocktail.

Some Saturday night out. I should have been celebrating my first week of college. Mom and Gran had wanted to take me out to hear all about it—not that Mom hadn't heard everything over the phone. She said she wanted to hear it again face-to-face. I'd compromised by letting them take me out for Sunday brunch. The later the better. Who knew how long we'd be kicking our heels at the lodge.

Valerie stared over my shoulder and grumbled. "Look at those two drones next to him."

I followed her gaze to Diederick, sitting regally atop his chair like a king on his throne. One of his female attendants held a bottle of wine in the palm of her left hand, her right hand wrapped around the bottle's neck. Diederick held up his glass, and she poured a small amount of red wine.

I wrinkled my nose. "Melcher wants me to get close to that male chauvinist? I don't think so."

"Just keep an eye on him," Valerie said.

"Easy enough," I answered in a low voice. "Seeing as he hasn't gotten off his ass since we arrived."

Valerie snickered.

There weren't many guests who looked older than Diederick. When it came to vampires, age was always misleading. Most of them were young, my age or low twenties, which usually meant they were old in terms of days spent on earth. Before modern medicine came along, it was all too common for people to die in the bloom of youth—usually taken away by disease. That is unless they had AB negative or positive blood, in which case the disease triggered vampirism, and they stopped aging.

I finished my water. I had to hand it to Valerie. She did a good job nursing her drink.

We watched Foster present a man in his late twenties to Diederick before

escorting him back out. Guess the vamp wanted to get right to it. A tall, leggy woman with silky brown hair twisted and secured in a rhinestone barrette walked in after their departure. She wore a long black dress with a slit up the leg. It was difficult to decipher her age. Hair and makeup easily added several years, but beneath that she might have been in her early twenties.

She noticed me staring, smiled, and sauntered over.

"Hi, I'm Selene," she said, extending her manicured fingers toward me.

When I took her hand, she squeezed it.

"Aurora," I said. "And this is Valerie."

"Aurora and Valerie," Selene repeated. "Beautiful names for beautiful women."

I felt a blush coming on. Compliments always unnerved me. Valerie looked Selene up and down with a mistrustful glare.

"Are you together?" Selene asked.

I completely mistook her meaning at first. Yes, we were together. We'd arrived together and we were hanging out, sorta, waiting for Dante together.

"Her boyfriend's upstairs," Valerie said.

"Ah," Selene said, grinning. She placed an arm on the counter beside me and leaned in. "No doubt he'll find this evening's selection satisfactory. Personally, I don't think it begins to compare with what's right in front of me."

My cheeks were definitely red now. Was she hitting on me?

Valerie placed a hand on her hip. "Are you a vampire?" she asked.

Selene moved her gaze from me to Valerie. "You sound surprised."

"I don't see any reason why I should be."

Selene shot Valerie a cheeky smile. "Indeed not. My fanged brothers aren't the only ones who enjoy a good suck with a beautiful woman."

Okay, way out of my comfort zone. And although Selene was chatting with Valerie, she was within a hairsbreadth of me. She'd already pressed her hip against my thigh. I didn't want to offend her, so I tried my best to keep a neutral expression and not lean away.

"And you, Valerie, are you with someone?" Selene asked.

Valerie pushed her hair back in one glamorous movement as though tossing a scarf over her shoulder. "Not tonight," she said in a matter-of-fact, rather than flirtatious, tone.

Selene's laugh sounded like tinkling bells. "Oh you're trouble, aren't you, Cherry Bomb?" Selene pulled away from the counter. "Would you care to join me for a game of pool?"

Valerie slid off her stool. "Why not?" When she caught my questioning look, Valerie retorted, "I'm not going to sit on my ass all night waiting for Dante."

I took a deep breath. "Fine. I guess I'll just sit here by myself and contemplate the meaning of life."

A soft hand touched my bare shoulder. When I turned, Selene gave me a

friendly smile. “You’re welcome to come watch. We can take turns.”

“Thanks. Maybe later,” I said.

Her smile widened. “You are so sweet. I hope that vamp of yours treats you right. We’ll be in the room next door if you change your mind.”

Selene turned gracefully and headed back the way she’d come in. As Valerie passed me she said, “Have fun staring at the wall.”

I considered flipping her off. It did no good kidding myself that we were close friends. There was only one person Valerie looked out for: herself. Naturally, I didn’t need her to hold my hand, as I’d killed five vampires and gone through boot camp, but a little company never hurt.

“Can I get you something besides water?”

I gave a little start. I hadn’t noticed the bartender standing right in front of me.

“No, thanks. I’m good.”

Except that it felt weird sitting alone at a bar not drinking. Maybe I could relocate to a secluded chair and think over my upcoming college assignments to pass the time.

I looked around. Diederick was still on his throne. I did not want to sit anywhere near him.

As I scanned the rest of the room, I met a familiar pair of eyes. Henry. He looked all spiffy in a black suit. I smiled, but he didn’t return it. I wondered if he and Noel still ate lunch together at West High. Not likely. Not since Valerie moved in on Henry’s best friend and Noel’s crush, Gavin.

Henry crossed the room, holding an empty martini glass. He sidled up beside me, setting the glass on the counter.

“Aurora Sky. Surprise, surprise.”

“Why’s that a surprise?” I asked. If he wasn’t going to say “hello,” I didn’t see why I should.

Henry narrowed his eyes. “It’s not.”

Okay, what was up his butt? We’d never been besties, but I didn’t see a reason for open hostility. I guess a lot had changed in the last six months.

The bartender swooped in for Henry’s glass.

“Another martini, sir?”

Henry nodded.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t care for something, miss?”

“I’m fine, thank you.”

Henry’s eyes narrowed when the bartender turned away.

“You’re not drinking?”

“No.”

“Then why are you here… at a tasting?”

“For the friendly conversation, obviously,” I answered sarcastically.

“Are you sure about that?”

I sighed. “What are you getting at, Henry?”

Henry drummed his fingers over the counter, the direction of his eyes

moving to the bartender. Once a fresh drink was placed in front of him, Henry took a drawn-out sip and set it down.

"I think I have a pretty good idea why you're here, Aurora."

Alarm bells went off inside my head. A vampire acting suspicious of a vampire hunter—not exactly comforting.

"What do you mean?"

Henry lifted his chin, never breaking eye contact. "I believe you're here looking for your next target."

"Target?" My heart pitter-pattered. "What are you talking about?"

Why the hell would Henry come to that conclusion? I'd done everything I could to remain inconspicuous about what I was. Granted, that never seemed to work out too well for me, but I had dated a vampire. That should've thrown him off my scent. And not just any vampire—I dated Fane Donado. That ought to be alibi enough.

I straightened on my stool. "I'm afraid you're not making sense, Henry. I'm here with my boyfriend, trying to have a good time."

"Who's your boyfriend?"

"Dante."

"Never heard of him."

"So? Do you know every vampire on the planet?"

Henry's eyebrows furrowed. He took a sip of his martini.

I folded my arms across my chest. "Mind telling me why I'm being interrogated?"

Henry straightened. "Richard Stanton hired me to investigate the death of his former partner, Marcus."

"I heard about Marcus's death," I said without a second's hesitation. "Terrible tragedy. I liked Marcus."

"Hmm. The thing is you were one of the last people to leave the palace on the night of his murder."

Cut to the chase why don't you, Henry? My heart jolted and beat erratically. That night felt like a bad dream. Ancient history. Long, long ago. In a galaxy far away. Something that happened to someone else. Boot camp had broken me into a million fragments and then put me back together. I was Aurora 2.0, boot camp graduate and sophisticated college student. Aurora 2.0 didn't kill Marcus. Her conscience was clear.

"You've been misinformed," I replied coolly. "I was one of the first guests to leave that night."

Henry took another sip of his martini, watching me over the rim before setting the glass back down. He leaned closer, speaking in a low voice. "I saw your red scarf hanging from a hook before I left."

"Really?" I asked. "I was wondering what happened to that old thing."

Henry's eyebrows pinched, meeting in the middle of his forehead. For the first time since interrogating me, he looked mad. "It wasn't there after he was found dead."

"I don't know what happened to it," I said, my voice rising. "I came to the party, saw Fane messing around and got the hell out of there. I was hurt and humiliated at seeing him with someone else. Happy now?" If he wanted to give me attitude, I'd give it right back.

Henry drummed his fingers a couple more times. Unfortunately, by the frown on his face, he didn't look like he bought my story. That, or he was still in decision making mode.

"I find it interesting that you disappeared right after Marcus' death. Where did you go, Aurora? Where have you been the past six months?"

My back straightened. "That's none of your business. You're not the police. Maybe you should leave the detective work to actual detectives."

Henry's eyes narrowed.

"There's been something off about you from the beginning. It never made sense to me why three vampires would come all the way down from Fairbanks to go after you, not unless they had a good reason. Not unless they knew something the rest of us didn't. Not unless they knew you were a vampire hunter."

My jaw dropped. Henry knew about the existence of vampire hunters? Freakin' fabulous.

"A what?" I asked in disbelief. "You mean like Buffy? You can't be serious?"

The way Henry studied my face put me instantly on edge. Come on Aurora 2.0, nothing fazes you, be cool.

"You wouldn't be the first," Henry said. "But you are much more advanced than past vampire hunters. Your blood is poison."

So he'd decided I was a hunter, had he?

I screwed up my face. "What are you talking about? I've never heard anything so ridiculous."

It was weird watching Henry watch me. He never struck me as dangerous, yet here he stood, sniffing around my skirt for clues. I should be afraid. Really afraid. Break-out-into-a-cold-sweat afraid. This wasn't good.

A situation like this called for my own personal carte blanche. Fane Donado. Vampire hunters didn't date vampires. Lucky for me, we'd gone out before the truth of what he was slammed down over my human heart.

I stuck my nose in the air. "Obviously I'm not out to kill vampires. I went out with Fane."

"Unless you were targeting him."

Now Henry was really pissing me off.

"That's outrageous!"

"Did he ever bite you?"

"Of course he bit me. He's a vampire."

I reached for my hair, momentarily forgetting Valerie had put it up.

Henry's hand shot forward so fast I didn't see it until his fingers squeezed around my wrist. Instinctively, I reached for the martini glass with

my free hand and threw the gin into his face. Henry roared with anger. He released my wrist and swiped at his eyes.

I jumped off my stool, unsure if I should stay and fight, try to make excuses, or fly the coop. Before I could decide, Henry blinked through the liquor, glaring bloody murder at me. The martini dripped down his face, wetting his white collar.

Time froze for a split second until the sound of clapping brought me back to the present.

Selene walked over to my side. "Nice going, Aurora. This one's a sweet talker, but I see his wily ways didn't work on you." She slipped her arm around mine, and this time I felt nothing but gratitude for her touch.

"This one's spoken for," Selene informed Henry.

Henry's eyes narrowed. "A word of warning, Selene. She only looks innocent. I wouldn't take my eyes off of her if I were you."

Selene's eyes sparkled. "I don't plan to."

"Don't say I didn't warn you."

Foster entered the room, a tight frown on his face. He came in alone and headed straight for us.

"Is there a problem here?" he asked.

Beside us, the bartender began mopping up liquid that had splashed off Henry's face and onto the counter.

"Relax, Foster," Selene said. "Henry simply tried to hit on my friend here while her boyfriend's upstairs. I think we can all agree she made her point." She smiled sweetly.

Foster's face didn't relax for a second. He turned his eyes to me.

"Are you all right, Miss?"

I lifted my head. "Perfectly." I turned to the bartender. "Sorry about the mess."

He gave a slight nod and continued wiping the counter.

"I apologize for any distress this man may have caused you," Foster said.

"I'm fine. Really." The last thing I wanted was to make a scene. No doubt about it, I sucked at undercover work. Here I was, throwing a drink in a vamp's face. Now the butler was involved, and people were watching and beginning to whisper.

"Now that I've made myself clear, I'm sure Henry won't bother me again."

Selene smirked.

Foster straightened his spine. "Nevertheless, Henry will need to answer for this disturbance. Diederick would like to see him at once."

My heart dropped. Just what I needed, Henry arousing suspicion with the host of this grand affair.

Henry pushed away from the bar, but not before glowering at me. "I will get the truth out of you, Aurora Sky."

Selene kept her arm around mine as she steered me toward the opening

of the rec room.

"Pay no attention to that old grump," she said. "He's actually quite charming when he wants to be, but when things don't go his way, he can be as petulant as a three-year-old. Men are so full of contradiction. I don't even try to understand them."

I only half-listened. At least her voice had a lulling effect that gave me a false sense of safety.

"Why did you come back?" I asked.

Talk about good timing. I hadn't expected to see Selene and Valerie for at least an hour.

Selene leaned her shoulder into mine. "I wanted to check on you. Your friend said this was your first tasting. Diederick runs a tight ship, but that doesn't always stop the cheapskates from trying to get a free taste below deck."

"I'm glad you stepped in," I admitted.

Selene gave my arm a pat with her free hand. "I'm afraid the pleasure is all mine."

She led me to a pool table in the next room. Valerie was waiting, fingers wrapped around a pool cue. "You decided to join us after all."

I had no desire to join their game. I wanted to get out of there as quickly as possible. Maybe Foster could go upstairs and find Dante.

"There was a vamp giving her trouble," Selene said.

Valerie's fingers tightened around the stick in her hand. "Which vamp?"

"It's nothing." I pulled my arm out of Selene's and waved it in the air. "It was Henry."

"Henry? What did The Great Gatsby want? Don't tell me! He wanted to taste you. Not your blood. Your essence. Trust me, I've heard it before. Henry really needs to update his lines." She lifted her chin at Selene. "It's your shot."

Selene glanced at me. "Why don't you take it?"

I shook my head. "I'll watch."

Valerie folded her arms as Selene picked up her pool stick and circled the table before settling on a spot across from me. She studied the table for a moment. Her head lifted slowly, and she winked at me before lowering it again and slamming her cue tip against the cue ball. It cracked against a blue striped ten, sending the table into a temporary chaos of flashing colors that smacked against the edges of the table. Two striped balls dropped into corner pockets.

"Show off," Valerie muttered with a grumble.

Good thing I hadn't taken Selene's shot.

I kept to the far wall, watching the game, but not really seeing it. My eyes kept flicking over to the opening of the rec room, expecting to see Henry storm through at any moment.

"That's game," Selene said. "Want to play again?"

Valerie huffed. “You’ve probably been playing for five decades. Like that’s fair.”

“Maybe you and your friend should play,” Selene suggested.

“What do you say, Aurora? Think you can take me on?” Valerie asked.

“What?” I tore my eyes from a couple leaving the rec room and looked at Valerie. “Sure.” I needed something to keep myself busy.

Selene handed me her pool stick while Valerie tossed the balls into a triangular rack on the table. Valerie took the first shot, breaking up the balls with a smack.

“I’m stripes, you’re solids,” she called.

On my first turn, I attempted to hit the orange five into a pocket, only to end up sending it bouncing aimlessly around the table.

Valerie slinked her way up to the table and got a striped green into a pocket right away. She moved to the corner and took her next shot. The cue ball bounced across the table two times before smacking the striped red eleven into a pocket.

Valerie smiled smugly. “This is more like it.”

She wasn’t successful with her third shot.

I approached the table and took a long look around. Even if I were halfway decent at pool, I wouldn’t be on my game tonight after the interrogation from Henry.

As I leaned into position, I felt a body press against my backside, and an arm slide over mine.

“Lean down more,” Selene said softly in my ear. “Hold the cue closer to the tip.” She guided my fingers as she spoke. “Guide the ball with your eyes. Focus on the spots you want it to strike.”

Valerie’s eyebrows rose across the table.

When Selene pulled back, cool air caressed my back. I focused on the table, the solid white, and the orange five I’d failed to hit earlier. I pushed my arm forward and struck.

The cue ball struck the orange, which hit the side of the table, bounced off, and rolled into a pocket.

“Yes!” I said, fist pumping the air.

“No fair,” Valerie said. “You got pointers.”

I squared my shoulders. “Doesn’t matter. I took the shot.”

Selene gave me an approving grin.

“Fine. Let’s see if you can do that again.”

Despite Selene’s personalized instructions, I missed the next shot… and the next. Valerie won. I didn’t care. About fifteen minutes into our game, Henry stormed past. I made sure to concentrate on the table when he went by. Now that he’d gone, I felt considerably more relaxed.

Selene encouraged Valerie and me to start up another game. “I’ll get us liquid refreshments,” she announced.

“I’m not drinking,” I said.

"And I'm the designated driver," Valerie noted with an eye roll.

Selene smiled. "I'll have him make us virgins." With that she disappeared into the rec room.

Valerie came around the table and nudged me in the ribcage. "You two make a cute couple."

"She's nice," I said, not taking the bait.

"Maybe Dante will get lucky and score some simultaneous loving after all."

I tossed a hand up at the ceiling. "Dante is getting plenty of loving already. How long does it take to make the rounds and get some quick samples?"

Valerie grinned deviously. "Maybe he's doing more than sampling."

I glared at her. "You can be a real bitch sometimes."

"Like you aren't wondering the same thing."

Actually I wasn't. I had bigger worries, like being a suspect in Marcus' murder. Henry had every right to be suspicious. This wasn't anything like the mystery surrounding Agent Crist's death, though I was sure Jared was responsible. I knew exactly who killed Marcus. Me.

What I really wondered was if I'd seen the last of Fane. He said he'd only been helping Noel out. He said he should have stuck by my side, that he wouldn't make the same mistake twice. That was before Dante showed up and staked his claim. Would Fane give up now? Had he meant what he said?

I'd told him it was too late. I was tired of being strung around. Dante did everything straight up. He wanted me plain and simple, but was that enough?

Valerie must have taken my hesitation to mean something else.

"Relax," she said. "At least you know you're getting laid tonight. All that blood and sucking is going to make Dante horny as hell."

And she expected this information to help me relax? Sometimes I forgot Valerie and I were polar opposites.

"He might be human, but he's still a close cousin of vampires," Valerie whispered beside my ear. "I bet he could do it all night long."

There was no way I'd sleep with Dante tonight. Our first time, if there ever was one, wouldn't follow on the coattails of his suck fest.

My first time had been hasty, awkward, and about as pleasant as a root canal. The next experience needed to be loving. No jumping in during the heat of the moment. Ripping off clothing and being ravished worked well in romances, but I wanted something meaningful.

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10
Blood Rush

Selene swept into the pool room with two drinks. Her movements were graceful as she handed a pink drink to Valerie.

"I got a Shirley Temple for Valerie."

"Ha, ha," Valerie said, taking the cherry-topped drink from Selene.

Selene moved over to me and held out the second drink.

"And a sparkling apple cider for Aurora."

"Thanks. What about you?"

"I'm fine for now." Selene's teeth glinted when she smiled. "Unless you want to share."

"Sure." I wasn't really that thirsty, and it wasn't not like I could catch anything from Selene. Nope, I had all the diseases covered. I might not live forever, but there was a certain sense of invincibility knowing I couldn't get sick.

I took a sip of cider and handed the glass to Selene. I felt a lot more comfortable around the female vamp after she stepped in with Henry. Something about her presence gave me a sense of safety. So much of my time had been spent with male vampires that Selene was something of a novelty.

"Are you here with anyone?" I asked after she passed the cider back to me.

Selene looked away as though my question embarrassed her. "Kind of."

"And you know Henry?" I didn't recognize Selene from any of Marcus' parties. Then again, I'd only been to four. And I'd been a bit preoccupied when those visits ended in abduction, stalking, and suspension from a ceiling. I didn't exactly take time out to stop and stare at the guests closely during my forays into the palace. The only remotely normal experience I had at Marcus' house was when I had a few too many and asked Fane to drive me home.

Selene touched my arm. I blinked the fog of thoughts away.

"Are you okay?" Selene asked.

No, not really. I thought boot camp had prepared me for jumping back into the field. I also thought six months would be enough distance between me and what happened at Marcus' party. Standing in a room full of vampires again only brought it all back. I didn't want to be here. I needed more time. I felt trapped.

I shook my head.

"What is it?" Valerie demanded.

Selene frowned at her.

I took a deep breath. "Nothing."

Valerie set her drink beside the empty glasses on a tall square table.

“This game is getting old,” she announced. “Maybe Selene can introduce us to some of her friends.”

Selene looked at me, one smooth eyebrow raised. “Is that what you’d like to do, Aurora?”

I glanced toward the rec room. I didn’t like it in there. The space felt way too walled in. But Valerie had a job to do. She couldn’t compile much of a guest list spending the evening with me and Selene at the pool table.

Good thing it was up to Valerie to remember names as Selene made introductions because I was in Aurora land for the rest of the party. The harpist wasn’t helping. I swore the music put me into a trance.

I listened in when a well groomed man in his early twenties kissed Selene on the cheeks and asked, “How was California?”

Selene didn’t answer immediately. She looked at the guy like he’d just asked how she was holding up after losing her favorite dog. Selene’s lips formed a grim line.

“It was lovely, as usual,” she replied.

“And your family is well?”

Selene did the stare thing again before turning to me. “Paul, allow me to present my new friends Aurora and Valerie.”

“Charmed,” Paul said. “Are you human or vampire?”

“Human,” Valerie answered, shooting Paul a sultry smile.

Paul looked her up and down and said, “In that case, will you permit me to fetch you a drink?”

“I’ll come with you,” Valerie said.

She took Paul’s arm when he offered it and they headed to the bar. That drink better be virgin, or Valerie better sip it slowly. I wondered if cab companies would come all the way up the mountain.

Selene’s mouth drooped with concern when she looked at me.

“Would you like to sit in the living room upstairs?”

“Are we allowed?”

“You can go wherever you want except for the third floor. Follow me.”

Relief washed over me with each step I took away from the party. I’d never considered myself claustrophobic, but tonight all the walls felt like they were squeezing me in. The stairway seemed as though it had narrowed since I walked down. It wasn’t until we entered the wide open living space with the high ceiling that I felt like I could breathe normally again.

“Is this better?” Selene asked.

“Yes, thank you,” I said.

She sat on a forest-green couch. I took the armchair in front of her.

“These gatherings can be overwhelming, especially when it’s your first time,” Selene said. “Male vamps forget that sometimes.”

“How many women are up there?”

“A dozen.”

I leaned forward. “There are twelve bedrooms upstairs?”

"Eight," Selene said. "Some women have to share a room."

My fists clenched.

"Does it bother you that your boyfriend is up there?" Selene asked.

"Yes," I answered truthfully.

Why did Dante have to get this assignment? How could I not think about him sucking blood hickeys off twelve different women in one night? The whole thing made me nauseous.

Dating him was a bad idea, especially with missions like this.

"Don't be too hard on him," Selene said softly.

I looked at her in surprise.

"It's one of the few rushes we get."

"Blood," I said, stating the obvious.

Selene nodded. She looked off into a dark corner of the living room, not meeting my eye as she spoke.

"There's not much sense living forever if you don't feel alive."

I took it she spoke from experience.

"How long have you been around?" I asked.

"Sixty years, give or take."

"You're… young." I didn't know why the words came out sounding so stunned. Sixty in human years was getting up there, but in vamp years it didn't sound long at all. Selene hadn't even been around for a century.

"Thank you," she said, her thick lashes fluttering.

"You're from California?"

"That's correct," Selene said.

"So you decided to take a break from the sun?"

"I decided to give my family space."

I tilted my head. "Your real family?"

Wouldn't they notice Selene wasn't aging? Maybe she meant a vamp family like the Morrel's.

Before Selene could answer, a slightly overweight thirty-something man with thinning brown hair and metal rimmed glasses stepped into the living room. Rough lines appeared over his face when he frowned. He barely glanced at me, choosing instead to focus on Selene.

"There you are, Selene. Hitting on a human again?"

Selene straightened. "Making polite conversation, Randal. Perhaps you should try it sometime." Her tone lost its musical quality.

"I don't come to these things to make conversation."

Randal walked directly behind Selene. His hands shot forward. He began massaging her shoulders, but from the way her neck hunched, his grip looked too rough. She leaned forward out of his grasp and rose regally.

"Aurora, it was very lovely to meet you."

"You, too," I said, looking from Selene to Randal.

"Come along, Selene. You've had enough for tonight."

Selene was a good four inches taller than Randall, not to mention a

hundred times more attractive. What was she doing with the control geek? Looks didn't matter, but in that short exchange it was clear Randal lacked in personality as much as physical attributes.

She followed Randal out of the living room without another word. Long after they'd left, I stared in the direction I'd last seen the odd pair.

I was confused. Had Selene been hitting on me because I was a woman or because I was human? Or both?

What was she doing with a guy like Randal?

I looked around the empty living room.

I felt starved for friendship. I wondered what Donna, Michelle, Amber, and the other girls from boot camp were doing right now. Did any of them have a weekend mission to complete or were they at the movies with a bag of popcorn in their laps?

Boot camp had given me a taste of community. We were like a family. We bonded. We fought. We embraced certain members and tolerated others. Sleep was the only break we got from each other. There was the emotional exhaustion of being around women all the time on top of the physical fatigue. Sometimes I swore the emotional kind was worse.

Now here I sat, all alone. It felt unnatural. Loneliness was like a stomachache, eating away at my insides, causing me physical pain.

Is that why Selene was with Randal?

Is that why I was with Dante?

Why shouldn't I be with Dante? He was a good guy. Handsome. Funny. Caring. Committed. That should spell out winner in all caps.

Maybe I wasn't physically repressed so much as emotionally repressed… like a vampire. How had I gotten this way? To become detached was to let Jared win. I ought to look to Dante as a prime example of living a life filled with purpose and pleasure.

I was a living, breathing, aging soul; and it was about time I got my head on straight and started enjoying my finite youth.

Hopefully Dante would rub off on me.

Voices drifted up from the stairs and became louder as a group emerged and walked past the living room to depart via the entryway.

Melcher wouldn't be happy if he could see me lounging inside an empty room with the party and Diederick downstairs. That was Valerie's area of expertise. I didn't know what I was good at besides being bait. I could kill, which meant something in this line of work, but I didn't like it.

Hmm, which college major went well with murder? Philosophy? Theatre? Justice?

I didn't see the point in any of it unless Melcher expected us to work day jobs on the side.

"Hey, there's my girl."

I gave a start when I heard Dante's voice. I hadn't seen or heard him enter the living room.

His cheeks were flushed and dimpled when he grinned.

"Are you finished?" I asked.

He nodded energetically.

"Did you miss me?" he asked. "I missed you."

During the upstairs blood orgy? I doubted that.

"I'm ready to go," I said.

"Me, too. Where's Red?"

"Downstairs mingling."

"Want me to get her?"

I nodded. "If you don't mind."

"Be right back."

I leaned back into the chair, relieved I didn't have to return to the room below. I didn't even care that it took Dante a good fifteen minutes to reappear with Valerie.

We left the way we'd come. The valet who had greeted us when we first arrived brought the Jeep around.

"I'm okay to drive," Dante said to me, climbing into the driver's seat.

"Good because I'm not," Valerie said.

I glared at her, but she missed it as she hopped in behind Dante. Once we had our seat belts on, Dante drove off the property and into the night. The headlights lit up the dirt road spiraling down the mountain.

"I'm more than okay," Dante announced. "I feel like I could race in the Grand Prix."

"Great," I said. "So long as you don't do it down the mountain side."

Valerie giggled. I looked in the rearview mirror and saw her cover her mouth. So much for staying sober.

"Did you get the lowdown on Diederick?" Dante asked.

"Aurora was too preoccupied with the vamp hitting on her," Valerie announced.

I glared into the rearview mirror. Valerie swayed to the right even though the next turn wasn't for another fifteen feet.

"Some blood sucker went after my woman while I was upstairs?" Dante said angrily. "That's it. I'm turning the car around and calling this guy out."

Valerie sniggered. "It wasn't a guy. It was a woman."

Dante slouched back. "A lady vamp? In that case tell me everything. Was she attractive?"

"Long legs, lean, limber body, silky brown hair… What do you think Aurora? Did you find Selene attractive?"

There wasn't much use glowering at Valerie in the mirror when she could barely hold herself upright.

I lifted my chin. "Selene was very nice." A lot nicer than Valerie.

"Did you two kiss?"

"No."

Dante's chin dropped. "No?" he repeated, sounding disappointed.

"Did you kiss anyone?" I returned.

"Of course not."

"What took you so long?"

Valerie quit the giggling and huffed. "It's not a timed exercise, Aurora."

Dante drove, head turned to me. "I wanted to give you two enough time to gather information below. Are you upset?"

"No. Please watch the road."

Dante kept looking at me.

I sat up. "There's a turn!"

Dante glanced forward, cranking the wheel into a hairpin turn, and skirting the edge of the mountain. The tires slid over the gravel.

"Yahoo!" Valerie called out, throwing her arms up. "Where to next? Koots?"

She was talking about Chilkoot Charlie's, Anchorage's most popular nightclub. I'd never gone, not even to test out my fake ID. Getting shoved around and hit on by drunk guys didn't sound like my idea of a good time.

"I'm game," Dante said.

"I don't know," I said. "It's been a long week."

"Two against one!" Valerie called triumphantly.

"Ah-hem," Dante said. "You're forgetting that I've got the wheel. Driver decides. Aurora wants to call it a night. We call it a night."

I shot Dante an appreciative smile.

"No fair," Valerie said. "You two just want to get home and get down to business."

Rather than respond, I reached forward and turned on the radio. Bruno Mars' "Treasure" came on, and Dante started singing on cue. The scowl I saw on Valerie's lips in the mirror brought a smile to mine. She sulked the remainder of the ride.

We zoomed by the familiar grounds of Denali High, driving under street lamps through Valerie's neighborhood. Dante passed her Honda, parked in the street, and pulled into the driveway. Her guardian had left the outside porch light on.

Once we were stopped, Dante lowered the volume on the radio.

Valerie jumped out and said, "You two suck!" before slamming the door.

As she walked in front of the Jeep, Dante blasted the horn. I jumped in my seat. Valerie jumped, too. She turned on her heel and flipped Dante off.

Dante looked over his shoulder, laughing as he backed into the street. I didn't like being in this part of town. It reminded me too much of my high school days and Fane. Soon enough, we were back on the main road.

"Now that we've ditched the third wheel, what say we go to Koots?" Dante asked mischievously. "Kidding," he added a second later.

"She'd kill us both," I said.

"I think you could take her."

That made me smile. "Really?"

"Totally. Chicks who act tough are usually trying to hide the fact that deep down they're insecure and afraid."

"Thanks, but I've seen Valerie in action, and I don't think she's either of those things."

Dante shrugged. "I still think you could take her."

I gave his shoulder a light shove. "You're just trying to butter me up."

"I don't know. It sounds like I've got competition now—lady vamp on the loose. Did she hit on Red, too?"

"Not really."

"She prefers sweet over sassy. Can't blame her there."

"You and Valerie are turning this into something it's not. Selene and I were just talking, plus she was there with a guy. Do you consider it flirting any time another man talks to you?"

Dante nodded. "Point taken."

"Good. Now tell me what happened upstairs?"

Dante drummed his fingers over the steering wheel. "Let's not talk about work anymore."

Oh, so it was okay to kid around about me and Selene, but suddenly time to change the subject when it came to the wine flight. I tried a different approach.

"The taste of blood can be overwhelming. How are you feeling?"

"Better than ever," Dante said. "But only because we got our foot in the door. I don't care about the blood. I'm not a real vampire."

I wasn't a vampire, either, but I did enjoy the blood. I thought Dante would have too. I thought I wouldn't be alone in my cravings.

Selene understood. She said it was one of the few rushes she got.

I really shouldn't be relating to a vampire.

As we got closer to campus Dante, asked if I wanted to come over for a cup of coffee.

He lifted both hands off the wheel. "Just coffee, I swear. Oh! And kissing. And touching." He stroked the back of his neck with two fingers, grinning. "And more if you want."

"I think I just want to call it a night," I said.

"It's your call."

"Thank you."

Dante had to park in the street because a beat-up MGB Roadster was parked behind Noel's car. Good. If Noel had company, that made it easier not to talk to her.

"Looks like the after-hours party is at your place," Dante said.

I huffed.

Dante leaned into the wheel. "I still don't get it. I wish you and Harper would make up."

"Why do you care?"

"Because you're my teammates. You're both good at what you do, and

you're both great gals." Dante grinned and added in a goofy voice, "Can't we all just get along?"

"That's not how the world works." I reached for the door handle.

"Did I tell you how beautiful you look tonight?" Dante asked.

"Thanks."

"Spend the night with me," he said softly.

My heart raced more out of panic than excitement. "Not tonight."

"What about next weekend? Will you stay over? My roommate will be working on the slope—out of town for two weeks."

I focused on the houses beyond the windshield, gathering my thoughts.

When I didn't answer right away, Dante frowned. "Does this have something to do with your ex?"

I shook my head slowly. "This isn't about him."

"Then what is it?"

"I can't help thinking we'd be better off as friends."

I couldn't bring myself to look at Dante when I spoke. He'd helped my family while I was away, cheered me up by text, waited for me. I owed him. If only my heart could connect to my head and the logic it presented.

"Is this because of what Melcher said?" Dante asked.

"I don't know."

Dante put his hand on my leg gently. As soon as my eyes met his he said, "Don't worry about tonight or next weekend. Forget your ex and forget Melcher. Give us a chance."

Such sweet words. Why couldn't they make me feel something other than guilt?

Finally I nodded.

At the very least, Dante deserved a chance.

He gave me a quick kiss on the lips before removing his hand from my leg.

I hopped out of the Jeep, my dress sliding down to my ankles. Dante followed the fabrics downward motion with his eyes.

"Sure you don't want me to come in and patch things up between you and Harper?" he asked, voice returning to normal.

"I'm sure."

Dante's grin widened. "Sure you don't want me to come in and distract you from her?"

I smiled back. "Good night, Dante."

He pulled away and was gone before I reached the front door. As I passed the Roadster, I took a quick look inside at a set of black seat covers with white skulls and satanic wings stretching across the fabric. Did Noel have Whitney and Hope over? I would have loved to say "hello" under normal circumstances.

I reached the door and jammed my key into the deadbolt.

The plan was simple: beeline it for my bedroom. I walked in with my

head bent, watching where I stepped in the dim foyer. When I looked up the staircase, a short guy with an eyebrow piercing dressed all in black moved down a step. I nearly screamed. I hadn't expected to see anyone in the hallway or on the stairs.

Once my heart dislodged itself from my throat, anger ripped through me.

"Who the hell are you?" I demanded.

The guy stopped. "I'm Daren. Don't you remember me?"

I squinted a moment, eyes adjusting to the dim lighting. He didn't look like anyone I'd ever met.

"No, I don't," I said.

"Denali High," the guy prompted. "I'm one of Fane's friends."

I looked at him again. This time I noticed the bite mark on his neck. I folded my arms over my chest.

"You're bleeding, Daren from Denali."

Daren's eyes widened. His nose practically touched his shoulder when he turned to look.

"Oh, um… um…"

"Um, um, what?" I asked impatiently. "What are you doing here?"

"Noel invited us over."

Us?

It hit me. Noel had a vampire in the house.

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11
Sex Games

Although I was taller than Daren, his position on the stairs made it so I had to look up at him. I lifted myself onto the balls of my feet and glared beyond his shoulders. His brows dropped. His head turned quickly as though he expected to see someone standing behind him. But there wasn't anyone. My scowl was aimed at the room above.

With three swift steps I reached the staircase and charged up the stairs. Daren's eyes widened as I closed in on him, but it was only to push him aside and make my way up.

"Wait," he said suddenly. "They're not done yet."

Not done? Oh yes they were!

How dare Noel bring a vampire into our home? I ought to grab the dagger from my nightstand, but I didn't have the patience to pass Noel's closed door without pounding it with my fist.

"Noel is not to be interrupted," Daren called feebly behind my back.

I turned the doorknob and threw the door open so hard it hit the inner wall. Either Noel hadn't locked it or rage had given me Hulk-like strength, though if that were the case I would have ripped the door off its hinges rather than merely push it open.

A single pillar candle flickered in the wind of my arrival from on top of Noel's nightstand.

My eyes flew immediately to her companion who sat up quickly from his place on the bed. He wore ratty Goth clothes, had black hair, a round face, broad shoulders, and impossibly round eyes—most likely caused by my abrupt arrival.

Luckily Noel and her companion were fully clothed. The boy quickly covered his neck with his hand.

Noel had the audacity to smirk at me. "Maybe try knocking next time."

Her glossy lips, highlights, and short plaid skirt fit her. It also made it easier on me. The deep, dark, sensitive friend I'd known was gone, Goth Girl replaced by Gossip Girl. Why she'd invite another human in on the suck-fest was beyond me. Maybe Daren arranged the rendezvous in exchange for a turn with his fanged friend.

I looked at the vampire, still holding his neck, which was weird. Shouldn't Noel be the one covering her neck?

"Who are you?" I demanded.

The guy scrambled off the bed, hand cupping his neck as though glued to his skin.

"I'm Reece. We went to Denali together."

Neither his name nor Daren's rang any bells—not that I stored names in my head. Apparently not faces, either. Didn't matter. He needed to go. The fact that Noel would invite such a creature into our home made my stomach clench into a fist-sized ball of molten rage.

"You and your friend need to leave now," I said to Reece.

Noel slid off the bed in one fluid motion. Not a single strand of her perfectly streaked copper and gold hair was out of place despite romping around in bed with two guys.

"You're not going anywhere," Noel said in a calm voice. "You and Daren can wait for me in the living room while I have a chat with my roommate."

So now I was the roommate rather than Aurora.

"See you downstairs," Reece said, eyes on Noel. He closed the door behind him.

Noel looked up as though listening to his retreat before directing her gaze at me. "If this living arrangement is going to work, you need to start respecting my privacy."

"And you need to stop entertaining vampires in our house," I retorted.

Noel snorted. "Daren and Reece aren't vampires."

I looked at Noel's neck. I didn't have the clearest view standing in the dark, but I couldn't make out any bite marks.

She raised her eyebrows.

"Both those boys were bleeding," I said. "Who did that to them? You?"

The candle light glinted off Noel's eyes. She grinned slowly.

"I give a wicked hickey."

That wasn't a hickey, more like a laceration. I shivered. What if Noel was into sick role playing games? That, or she was a vampire. I didn't know which scenario to believe. Had she turned while I was away at camp? Noel the she-vamp. Crazy. But something had changed.

Before I could say anything, Noel spoke.

"Lovely dress. Did you and Dante have a nice date?"

Oh no she didn't.

"I was out on assignment," I said. "Why aren't you?"

Noel shrugged. "I'm between assignments at the moment."

How come Noel got a carte blanche? And a convertible! Not that I was in the market for an automobile, but seeing the damn thing in the driveway rattled my cage.

Noel flipped her hair back. "Are we done here? My guests are waiting for me."

"I want them to leave."

"For the second time—they're not vampires."

I folded my arms at her tone. "Are you?"

Noel stared at me a moment, her expression unreadable, before answering, "I like role playing."

I wrinkled my nose. So she did like sex games.

"I don't want those guys over here," I said.

"Well, that's too bad."

Noel blew out the candle, temporarily pitching us into darkness. Her night vision must have been better than mine. The floor creaked with her swift steps toward the door. She brushed past me. Light from the hallway spilled in when she pulled open the door. I leapt to action, extending a hand to stop the door and prevent her from escaping.

"Who else have you had over?" I asked.

Noel glared at me. Funny how she looked more intimidating as a prep than she ever had as a Goth.

"I'm guessing you mean Fane. Look, I tried to explain things to you, but you refused to listen. There is nothing between me and Fane. Never was. He helped me out. I helped him. End of story. Why do you care so much, anyway? You're with Dante now, aren't you?"

"I don't care," I said, straightening my shoulders. "I just don't want vampires in the house."

Noel stared at me.

"Right," she said, nodding. "Sure thing. No vampires allowed." She pushed past me, and walked out the door.

My lip curled back. Even if those boys weren't vampires, they were friends of Fane's… and Goths. Guess Noel was still into all that despite her perky new look.

I had no interest in following her downstairs or arguing further. I thought she'd be out on assignment Friday and Saturday nights, and I could enjoy a little peace and tranquility. Instead, I shut myself inside my bedroom.

As I pulled the dress over my head, the caress of the smooth fabric sent shivers through me. My thoughts shifted to Dante.

I didn't know what to feel.

I liked the way things had been before boot camp. Valerie had a point, though—my high school days were behind me. Relationships evolved. I couldn't stop Dante from wanting more.

I'd never had a close guy friend before Dante. That kind of relationship seemed more worthwhile than going out. Dating led to breakup. Friendship was forever. Why couldn't Dante see that?

My hair tumbled down my back when I freed it from Valerie's hair pick. I rummaged through my dresser for an old T-shirt to wear to bed, but when I crawled under the covers, sleep wouldn't come. I couldn't keep my mind on the same thing for longer than twenty seconds. One minute I'd think about Dante, the next Fane.

It felt like I was awake forever. I thought maybe I'd drifted off and not realized it, but, no, I heard Daren and Reece leave shortly after three a.m. according to my digital alarm clock. I also heard Noel come up the stairs, go into the bathroom, brush her teeth with an electric toothbrush, and shut the

door of her room.

To be expected, I had bags under my eyes the next morning. I did what I could with foundation and concealer before Mom and Gran picked me up at ten.

"There's my college girl," Mom said cheerfully after I answered the front door.

I gave her and Gran a quick tour of the downstairs. Noel didn't seem to have any trouble sleeping; in fact, she was still in slumber land upstairs.

"Nice place," Mom said as we backtracked through the kitchen.

Gran observed everything in silence. When we were outside she looked me over and said, "You look tired."

I shrugged. "I'm a college student."

"Well, don't burn yourself out. It's only week one. You need to make it to finals."

"Sure. Thanks, Gran."

"She'll feel reenergized once she gets some food in her belly," Mom said.

I followed them to the car, getting in behind Gran.

"Is your roommate nice?" Mom asked.

I gave a crude snort. "About as nice as a hyena."

Mom met Noel once. I didn't bother mentioning she was now my roommate. I didn't want to talk about Noel more than necessary. Besides, Mom would never recognize her.

Her brows furrowed. "Don't you think it's a little soon to judge?"

"Definitely not."

"Not everyone's as lucky as me," Gran spoke up from the passenger's seat. "I have the best roommate in the world."

"Aw," Mom said. She started the car.

Good to see those two getting along. It could have gone either way. I'd done my part by disappearing to boot camp for six months. With me out of the picture, that left Gran as Mom's closest family and confidant. Apparently Grandma had been a positive influence—not something I could have pulled off.

Sleep came to me Sunday night, but the deprivation from Saturday lingered into Monday morning. By Tuesday I was rested and better prepared for Noel's alarm clock to "bleep" through the wall at five thirty a.m. What joy to be free of the high school schedule!

The shower went on, followed by a hair dryer ten minutes later. I waited until the front door opened and shut before getting out of bed. I had about three hours before I needed to head over to campus.

I set up downstairs with the three T's: textbooks, toast, and tea. Having

an entire house, let alone room, to myself was still a novelty, as was the blissful quiet compared to the cafeteria at boot camp. At mealtime, we were left to our own devices, and girls tended to get rowdy when given an inch.

I lifted the cup of English breakfast tea to my lips while flipping through the reading assignment for Methods of Written Communication. My instructor wanted everyone to pick out a research topic for the first paper by the end of the week. A big research paper was due at the end of the semester. Documenting everything properly intimidated me more than the actual research or writing.

I glanced at the clock on my phone every so often. I swore time sped up whenever I wanted it to last longer. So far, what I liked most about college were the tranquil hours of studying alone at home. On campus I felt on edge, like the new student I was. I hadn't gotten into my groove yet.

After breakfast, I dragged myself back up the stairs for a shower. At least there wasn't any crap on the countertop—no makeup or hair products scattered around, getting in my way. I was sure plenty of roommates left a mess, but Noel was surprisingly organized.

I showered, shaved, and dressed. Makeup wasn't really my thing. When I finished combing my hair, I had ten minutes before I needed to head out.

It took roughly eight minutes to walk to campus if I was quick and another five to get to my first class. I didn't want to arrive out of breath, so I gave myself twenty minutes.

My breath fogged the air as I hoofed it through the neighborhood. The trees were shedding leaves more every day. Melcher managed to do something right by finding me a place with an easy walk to campus. It was the least he could do.

I followed the road to Lake Otis Parkway and climbed the stairs to the overhead foot bridge. Once on the other side, I had to backtrack up Lake Otis to the west end parking lot. The extra walking took about the same amount of time as waiting for the cross walk at the intersection of 36th Avenue and Lake Otis. I preferred movement to standing in place, especially when it was cold and only getting colder.

I'd planned my schedule to start out my first class of the week in one of the buildings nearby in case I was ever running late. Once the snow fell, gearing up and walking over would take longer, but that was still a month off —two if Mother Nature played nice.

I silenced my phone after taking a seat in my Written Communications class. Following English, I had Introduction to Women's Studies. I'd cherry picked the classes that sounded most interesting for my first semester. Math could wait until sophomore year… or junior… or if I really wanted to push it, senior year. Nothing like a looming graduation to put the pressure on.

The sun came out after lunch. I followed the example of my peers and sat at a picnic table, attempting to complete reading assignments. Three students at the end of the table swapped stories about what they'd done over summer

break. I felt a stab of pain inside my stomach. I never thought I'd miss boot camp, but once more I wondered what my girls were up to now that we'd graduated and gone our separate ways.

We had been strictly prohibited from exchanging addresses or phone numbers, even Facebook friending was not allowed. Our drill sergeants said we could slip up too easily and make a public reference to vampires or vampire hunting.

I stayed off Facebook, anyway. I didn't want to read about my former Denali High classmates at college, having the time of their lives.

When my last class of the day ended, I began the long walk home across campus. There were plenty of areas to kick back and study, but I preferred the comforts of home… even if that meant being under the same roof as Noel.

Her convertible sat parked in the driveway. At least there weren't any other vehicles around. I had no desire to walk in on more sex games.

I tossed my keys on the kitchen counter, draped my jacket over a chair, and dumped my books on the dining room table. First order of business: brainstorm research topics for Written Communications.

I flipped open a spiral notebook and clicked my pen into writing mode. When no ideas came to me, I clicked it on and off, thinking about how I was thinking about thinking. Not helpful! What I needed were ideas. I looked at the blank sheet of notebook paper. This was ridiculous. I needed to get online.

My laptop was upstairs on the desk I'd made Dante help me move into my bedroom. It wasn't fair that Noel got her own office, but there was only one place I could count on for privacy at any time, and that was my bedroom.

I got up, prepared to search the web for inspiration. Where else could a person find all the answers besides online? Before I'd cleared the kitchen, I heard a car engine hum up the driveway, followed by silence. I opened the front door in time to see Valerie slam her door shut. She'd pulled up behind Noel, blocking her in. Maybe not the best idea. Noel might want to flee when she saw who'd come over. Hopefully she'd remain upstairs. I hadn't heard a peep from her since walking home from school.

I sighed. At this rate, I'd be pulling an all-nighter.

Valerie skipped up to the door in a pair of tweed shorts and a tank top.

"Party time!" she announced.

"If by party you mean study session, by all means come in," I said sarcastically.

As Valerie stepped inside, Noel appeared on the stairway. She paused midway, staring wide-eyed at Valerie as though the vixen was the one who'd undergone a complete makeover.

For every millimeter Noel opened her eyelids, Valerie narrowed hers.

"Is that Noel?" she asked, sticking her nose in the air. "I hardly recognize her under all that makeup."

"What is Valerie doing here?" Noel asked in an even voice.

"Hanging out, what does it look like?" Valerie retorted.

Noel addressed Valerie directly, “Can’t you hang out somewhere else?”

“No,” Valerie said.

Noel looked from Valerie to me. “Oh, I see.” I couldn’t decipher her somber tone. She sounded more upset than mad. A second later, she retreated up the stairs rather than argue further.

“What’s her problem?” Valerie asked.

I shrugged and headed down the hall. Valerie followed me into the kitchen.

“Want something to drink?” I asked as I opened the fridge.

“Anything with alcohol.”

“Sorry, we’ve got juice or soda,” I said, blatantly ignoring the wine coolers in the far bottom corner of the fridge. I wasn’t so wretched that I’d take Noel’s drinks. Besides, I didn’t want to owe Valerie anything.

“No alcoholic beverages? What kind of hostess are you?” Valerie huffed.

“So you’re fine with juice?” I said, face still inside the fridge.

“Hold on a sec.”

When I turned around, Valerie’s thumbs were flying across her phone’s screen. “There,” she said, looking up. “Gavin’s stopping at the liquor store.”

My jaw dropped. “Gavin can’t come over.”

“Why not?” Valerie asked, her elbow pointing outward at a sharp angle when she stuck her hand on her hip.

“I told Noel no vampires allowed at home.”

It was one thing to have the vixen over, another to break my own rule by allowing Valerie to invite over Noel’s former crush. I wasn’t that cruel.

Valerie rolled her eyes. “Gavin’s my boyfriend.”

I had another good reason for not wanting him over.

“Henry was being really creepy the other night. I don’t want to hang out with his best friend.”

Valerie tsked. “Henry’s harmless. I’ll tell Gavin to have him back off.”

“I’m sorry, Valerie. Rules are rules.”

Valerie’s cheeks flamed. Her lips pulled back and she glared at me harshly. A couple seconds later she released a breath. With it, her shoulders dropped and her expression softened.

“Fine, you can tell Gavin he has to go when he gets here.” She turned on her heel and headed to the living room.

“Wait,” I called after Valerie. “You need to text him.”

“No way, he’s bringing the liquid refreshments.”

I followed Valerie into the living room where she’d already plopped onto the sofa and put her feet on the coffee table. She pointed the remote at the TV, flipping through channels until she landed on a music video and turned up the volume.

“Nice sound system,” she said bobbing her head to the tune. “Kennick doesn’t like me playing my music out loud.” Valerie snorted in disgust. She gave me a sly look. “She also doesn’t allow vampires over. You could be

BFs."

"Yeah, sure."

Valerie moved her arms in the air, not making conversation so much as singing along to tunes for twenty minutes until the doorbell rang.

I looked at Valerie. "Aren't you going to get that?" I asked. She should be the one dealing with Gavin. But she made no move off the couch.

"It's your house."

The last thing I wanted was for Gavin to ring again and have Noel come down and answer the door. No matter what she'd done with Fane, I wasn't the type of person to put her through that kind of agony.

I grumbled on my way out of the living room, though my displeasure was wasted on Valerie. The minx turned up the TV volume some more.

Come on brain, think of a reasonable excuse to send Gavin away before I reach the front door. No way could I mention the vampire thing. He might tell Henry, which would further cement my spot as a top ten suspect on Marcus's murderer list. Who else wouldn't allow vampires into her home other than a vampire hunter? Besides which, it wouldn't make any sense. It was a well-known fact that I spent my weekends at vampire hangouts and supposedly dated one. A woman like me should welcome vampires into her home with open arms and veins.

Maybe I should put it on Noel and say she didn't want him over. I was sure she didn't, at least not with Valerie here.

Or I could say no boys allowed. That wasn't biased toward vampires.

Lame, I told myself as I opened the front door. Gavin stood on the front step holding a bottle of rum in one hand and Coke in the other. He wore khaki pants and a light blue and green button up top. He looked nice. Either he'd lightened his brown hair or the sun had done it for him. I couldn't help thinking he and Noel would look really good together.

"Hi, Aurora. It's been awhile."

"Hello, Gavin," I said. "I'm sorry, but you can't come in."

Gavin's smile dropped. "What do you mean?"

I rubbed my lips together, trying to come up with the right words. Some people could bullshit on the spot; I wasn't one of them.

"It's complicated. I have a better idea anyway. Let's all go out." I said the last part extra peppy trying to make it sound preferable to sitting at home.

But Gavin's frown only deepened.

Before he could respond, Noel spoke up behind me, "It's okay. Gavin's welcome to come inside."

Gavin looked over my shoulder. His expression instantly softened as his eyes lifted to look at Noel on the stairs. I suppose in all the time I'd been away, he hadn't seen her, either. Valerie said he no longer went to West High, and I'd put an end to parties at the palace.

"You look incredible," Gavin said to Noel. I swore he looked star-struck.

Okay, enough of the awkwardness. Was it too much to ask for a chill

evening at home on a weeknight? I probably would've been better off in a dorm.

I pulled open the door. "Come in," I said.

If Noel said it was fine, than whatever. I didn't know where else to go or what to say, so he might as well come in.

Gavin stepped into the entryway. As I closed the front door, I got a quick look at Noel standing at the top of the stairs.

"How have you been?" Gavin asked her.

"Marvelous," Noel said. And she said it like she meant it, not like a woman trying to convince the guy who jilted her that she'd been better off ever since.

"How do you like being a senior?" Gavin asked.

"It beats being a junior." Before Gavin could ask another question, Noel said, with perfect pitch, "Good seeing you, Gavin." She turned and disappeared beyond the upstairs railing.

Gavin's shoulders sagged.

"Valerie's in the living room," I said.

Gavin stared at me as though he'd forgotten I was standing beside him.

"Follow me," I prompted.

As we entered the living room, Valerie jumped up.

"Finally! I was beginning to wonder if you were distilling the liquor yourself." She strode over to Gavin and reached her arms around his waist. I thought Valerie meant to hug him, but she grabbed both bottles from his hands.

"Now let's get this party started." Valerie lifted the bottles into the air and headed for the kitchen.

Gavin remained in place, leaning a little my way. "You and Noel live together?"

I nodded.

"How long have you—"

"Gavin! Are you coming or what?" Valerie hollered from the kitchen.

Gavin made his way to the kitchen slowly, not bothering to mask a scowl.

"You, too, Aurora," Valerie said.

There wasn't much else to do besides join my guests in the kitchen. Valerie made herself instantly at home, opening cupboards until she found three tall glasses. She went overboard on the rum, topping each glass with a splash of Coke. I took a sip and winced.

"That's strong."

"That's how I make them," she said, flipping her hair back.

Gavin leaned against the counter, sipping his drink in silence as his eyes moved slowly around the kitchen.

I managed to swallow another sip before setting my glass down. Valerie moved in beside me and gave me a playful smack on the thigh. "Drink up,

Aurora."

I thought about pointing out that it was a school night, but Valerie would only call me lame. Instead, I picked up my glass and took a small sip. That made her smile before turning back to her own drink.

Gavin continued looking around the kitchen—everywhere except at Valerie.

"So, Gavin, you're going to UAA?" I asked.

He glanced at me briefly. "Yeah."

"Ever gone to college before?"

"No."

"How do you like it so far?"

"It's okay."

Wow, quite the conversationalist. During our tantalizing exchange, Valerie downed half her beverage.

"It's too quiet in here. Let's go to the living room."

I shrugged. "Fine by me."

"But first I need a refill." Valerie looked at my glass. "What about you, slowpoke?"

I rolled my eyes. "Is this a competition?"

"If it were, you'd be losing." She doused her drink with more rum and attempted to do the same to mine, but I moved away too quickly. Valerie narrowed her eyes. "Killjoy."

"I'm perfectly capable of having fun with my full senses intact," I said.

"Yeah, you're soooo much fun. You really let loose." Valerie rolled her eyes. "Come on," she said.

Gavin made no move to follow us into the living room. Valerie whipped her head around when she noticed and didn't so much ask as demand, "Gavin, you coming?"

He stared at her a moment, back still resting against the kitchen counter. I watched, thinking a confrontation would take place, but, in the end, he stepped forward and joined us in the living room.

"Now let's see what else is on," Valerie said, picking up the remote and flipping through channels.

For several minutes, the TV flicked from channel to channel. Valerie only gave each one a few seconds before she moved onto the next.

"Or we could hang out and talk," I suggested, getting tired of the constant flipping. I grabbed the ottoman in front of an armchair, set it beside the couch, and sat down.

"I need background noise," Valerie said.

I looked at Gavin, who sat quietly on the opposite end of the couch. He studied the rim of his glass. After all the flipping, Valerie ended up reselecting the station with music videos.

She tossed the remote onto the coffee table. It landed with a clunk.

"My art professor has the hugest crush on me," she announced.

"I didn't know you liked art," I said.

Valerie glared at me as though I'd interrupted her. "Art appreciation, basic requirement," she said with annoyance. Her chest puffed up. "Anyway, he's appreciating this work of art, let me tell you." A smug smile returned to her face.

I glanced sideways at Gavin.

"He doesn't care," Valerie said, flicking her wrist in the air. "Older men have always been attracted to me. It's a fact. Too bad Gavin looks so baby faced. If only he could have aged a bit longer before going vampire."

Right, how inconsiderate of him to get sick at seventeen rather than at twenty-five.

I looked at Gavin. His jaw tightened, but he didn't say anything.

"How's your homework load?" I asked Valerie.

She squinted at me and took several sips of her drink before answering, "Who wants to talk about homework? God, Aurora, you really do need to learn to live a little." She pressed her back into the couch and emptied her glass. "Oh, Gavin," she said in a sing-song voice. "Can you make me another?"

"Sure," he said, standing quickly and snatching Valerie's glass before heading to the kitchen.

"There," Valerie said, sliding her palms against each other as though wiping them clean. "I figured he was making you uncomfortable. Now we can talk." She leaned into the armrest. "So our professor is showing us slides of Ancient Greek art. He clicks to the Venus de Milo, which is like a world famous statue of Aphrodite—goddess of love and beauty. Anyway, he's going on about how the statue is the epitome of female beauty and I look at him and he's staring at me. I mean staring! I didn't notice at first because, you know, like everyone else I'm watching the slides, but then I got this sixth sense like he wasn't talking about the sculpture anymore. He was talking about me." When Valerie finished she raised her brows.

Guess it was my turn to speak.

"Wow," I said. "If that's true, that's really inappropriate."

Valerie released an exasperated sigh. "It's romantic! He didn't grope me on my way out of class or look down my shirt when I turned in my assignment. He compared me to Aphrodite! Can you at least acknowledge that the man paid me the greatest compliment on the planet?"

Or I could point out that he hadn't actually paid her a compliment. He'd glanced at her while talking about a sculpture. He probably looked around regularly to make sure his students were paying attention.

"Are you sure he wasn't just making sure you were listening?" I asked.

"I know what I saw," Valerie said, lifting her head. "It's nice to be appreciated. When we first started going out Gavin would surprise me with flowers. Now, nothing. He's never been articulate, but at least he used to tell me I looked pretty." Valerie stopped talking a moment to huff. "Pretty," she

repeated in disgust. She sat up straight. “Goddess. Professor Alexander called me a goddess.” Her face froze as she stared into space with a wistful smile on her lips. Valerie almost looked like a statue, maintaining the pose as long as she did.

I couldn’t imagine going out with her. Spending time with her was challenging enough.

How long did it take Gavin to pour a drink? Couldn’t blame him for drawing it out.

I looked over Valerie’s shoulder and saw him in the kitchen—not pouring a drink—but talking to Noel. She appeared to be in the process of making a sandwich. There was a loaf of bread, jar of mayonnaise, block of cheese, head of lettuce, and a tomato beside the cutting board.

Gavin flicked a strand of Noel’s hair. She laughed and went back to whatever she’d been cutting. Gavin joined her, pressing up against her shoulder. Noel bumped against him and he bumped back.

Those two certainly got chummy fast. Maybe Gavin realized a seductress, like a carnival ride, was only exciting for so long before it made the passenger sick.

I didn’t realize I’d been staring until Valerie locked onto my eyes and followed their direction into the kitchen.

Her body tensed.

“Gavin!” she yelled. “Get in here!”

The smile fell from Gavin’s face. He didn’t move.

Valerie stood up.

Noel whispered something into Gavin’s ear right before she grabbed a plate and strode down the hallway, leaving before Valerie closed in.

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12
Trouble in Paradise

I kept my seat on the ottoman, listening to the tunes coming from the TV. From the corner of my eye, I saw Valerie toss up her arms in the kitchen and point in the direction where Noel disappeared.

Gavin's lips remained firmly pressed in a tight frown. At one point I heard Valerie's voice through the music when she yelled, "Don't just stand there. Say something!"

But Gavin's mouth didn't open. Instead, he turned and stormed down the hallway. The front door slammed shut, sending a slight tremor through the walls.

Drama. Drama. Drama.

Valerie returned to the living room. She flopped into the middle of the couch and crossed her arms over her chest. "Good riddance," she grumbled.

I raised a brow. "Trouble in paradise?"

"Paradise." Valerie snorted. "There's no such thing."

"Well, at least we agree on something."

Valerie flipped around to face me. "Did you see that?"

Valerie treating Gavin like her personal slave? Gavin flirting with Noel? Gavin storming out? Yeah, I had eyes.

I shook my head slightly not sure which of these Valerie wanted to focus on.

"I tell you, my art professor has the hots for me, and what does Gavin do? Nothing. Does he have anything to say about it? Nope." Valerie twisted her wrist in the air. "I bet I could have told you my art teacher backed me up against his desk and fucked my brains out and Gavin still wouldn't have said a god damn word."

"Maybe he's not the jealous type."

Valerie narrowed her eyes. "Or maybe he's the 'doesn't give a shit' type."

"Real keeper," I said, trying to lighten the mood.

Valerie snorted. "I'll say. Real find that one. He's a flea is what he is. A real man would take a swing at my prof or threaten him at the very least. But not Gavin." Valerie stared at the TV.

I cleared my throat. "So are you going to break up with him?"

Valerie turned away from the TV. "Yeah, right. Noel would love that. Like I'm going to hang around here watching those two pet and slobber over each other. Oh, they're a perfect match all right, but that's not happening. Not if I have anything to say about it."

Typical Valerie. The vixen would stay with a guy just to keep him away

from another woman.

"That's gotta suck, though," I said. "Going out with a guy you're not really into."

Valerie rolled her eyes. "Oh, please, like I don't have practice."

Fane? I wondered, or rather wished. The way Valerie talked about him at the Juneau airport convinced me she'd had real feelings for him. She'd flip her lid if she knew he'd shown up at the house. Far better that Dante found us together.

"I need another drink," Valerie announced before standing. "Bastard didn't even fix me my rum and Coke. Want another?"

"I haven't even finished my first," I said, lifting my glass.

"Well, drink up because I'm not leaving until you finish that one."

While Valerie was in the kitchen, I poured half my drink into the nearest potted plant.

"That's more like it," Valerie said, looking at my glass when she returned. "Bottoms up," she said before guzzling a good third of her drink.

A sudden thought occurred to me. "Are you going to be okay to drive?"

"Not a chance," Valerie said. "And since you don't drive I'll have to stay the night." She smirked.

Minx! It was one thing to have Valerie over for the occasional social visit, but I had most certainly not agreed to sleepovers. This was supposed to be my house, my haven. I didn't want to wake up to Valerie. I wanted my toast, tea, and quiet time before heading off to school.

Valerie gave the cushion a bounce. "This couch will do fine." Her lips twisted into a mischievous grin. "Unless you want to make Selene jealous and invite me into your bed."

"Or I could call you a cab."

"No way. I don't have any cash."

"Won't your guardian worry?"

"I'll tell her I'm spending the night with Gavin. Wouldn't be the first time, and since it's "work related" she can't say a word." Valerie smirked.

I stared at Valerie trying to think of a way to get her out of the house. She kept smiling, sure she wasn't going anywhere.

"Just this once," I said. "But you need to move your car so Noel can get out in the morning."

Valerie grinned. "Whatever you say, Aurora, but don't blame me if I accidentally hit her car, being as I'm impaired."

"Forget it," I said. "I'll move it." I stuck out my hand. "Give me your keys."

"So now you drive?" Valerie asked dubiously.

"Your keys," I repeated.

"They're in my purse on the kitchen counter." She resumed drinking making it clear she wouldn't fetch them for me. Ungrateful wench. She was more like Medusa than Aphrodite.

Valerie's oversized purse gaped open on the kitchen counter. I dug through the cosmetics, past a wallet, hair brush, and…brass knuckles? I pulled the weapon out of the purse and slipped my fingers through the holes, squeezing the brass into a tight fist. I took a quick look at the living room. Valerie's eyes were glued to the TV. I jabbed my armored fist into the air at an imaginary assailant. It felt pretty badass.

I shook my head, slipping the knuckles off and back inside the purse before resuming the search for the keys.

Seriously, how many tubes of lipstick did one woman require at any given moment? I'd counted at least five so far, unless the same tube kept falling into the hole I'd created in the center of the purse. I started dumping things onto the counter instead. There was a gun at the bottom of the purse, but no keys. Lipstick and lead—apparently no redhead left home without them.

"This is one of my favorite songs," Valerie squealed. "Aurora, get in here!"

"Not yet." I don't think so. I wasn't her boyfriend. She couldn't boss me around like Gavin.

I ended up finding the keys in a side pocket. Should have checked there first. Then again, this was probably the only chance I'd ever have to go through Valerie's purse without losing my head in the process. The keys dangled from a black and florescent-pink keychain that read, "Road Goddess."

I squeezed the keys in my palm. At the moment, they felt more dangerous than the brass knuckles. I was about to start a car up, on my own, and move it.

"I'll be right back," I announced.

"If you scratch my car, you're dead," Valerie said.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," I said, not masking my annoyance. Her attitude was enough to make me dive back into driving head first just to take her home.

As I walked down the hallway, I thought about how much it sucked that Noel and I were no longer friends. If we were, I'd ask for her help. But nine times out of ten, pride went all the way to the championships or, in my case, out the front door to face Valerie's red Honda Civic.

My body shivered. I hadn't grabbed a jacket. I wouldn't be out for long.

It was dark, but the road was dry. Besides, I had what? Twenty feet to drive? Child's play.

I unlocked the doors and ducked down to seat myself in front of the steering wheel. At first I just sat there, hands on the wheel, looking over the dashboard at the convertible parked in front of me. I put on my seatbelt and stuck the key in the ignition.

My hands began to sweat.

I started the car, and my heart rate revved with it.

My foot held the brake down so hard my leg began to ache. I took a deep breath and put the car in reverse. I lessened the pressure I had on the brake.

The car inched back ever so slightly. I pressed the brake and the car stopped.

I laughed nervously. “See? I’m the one in control. Not the car. Me. I control the car.”

I let up on the brake again and backed up ever so slowly.

Look at me now, Fane, I thought. I was doing this all on my own.

At the end of the driveway, I began turning the wheel. I’d been through the plan in my head. I knew what to do, and it was the easiest thing: back into the street and pull in alongside the curb.

I reminded myself out loud.

“Stop talking and park the car already.”

I looked over my shoulder, watching the road as I pulled out and backed up alongside the curb. Once clear of the driveway, I braked and put the car in park.

I let out a “whoop” before turning off the car.

“I did it!” I looked at the passenger’s seat. “Did you see that? I did it!”

I walked back up the driveway, a considerable bounce in my step.

I no longer need car rehabilitation, thank you very much, Fane.

Not that I planned on getting near a road anytime soon, but Noel might want to keep the keys to her convertible close… just in case. Who was the road goddess now?

I stepped inside and followed the sound of music to the living room, ready to proclaim my daring success, but when I walked in I found Valerie passed out on the couch, the lights from the TV flickering over her body.

Thank you, rum!

I grabbed the throw draped over the armchair and spread it over Valerie. She snored softly as I tucked her in. I worried that turning the TV off might wake her up, so I turned it down instead before retreating down the hall and making my way upstairs.

I stopped in front of Noel’s door, took a deep breath, and tapped softly. I wasn’t sure she’d hear me, but a moment later she called out, “Come in.”

Noel lowered a paperback as I entered her room. She sat, cross-legged, on top of her bed, looking relaxed in a pair of pink and blue cotton shorts and light gray tank top.

“Valerie’s spending the night on the couch,” I said. “FYI.” I backed out of the room.

Noel nodded once. “I understand.”

“I didn’t invite her... to stay the night,” I added.

“Thanks.”

I tilted my head to the side. Why was she thanking me? “For what?”

Noel set her book down and looked me in the eyes. “You didn’t want to force me to see Gavin and Valerie together. You weren’t going to let him come in. Thank you.”

I looked away. “That’s only because he’s a vampire.”

Both reasons were true, but Noel didn’t need to know that. There’d be no

kissing and making up between us anytime soon, but maybe, just maybe, we could come to some kind of peace.

"Aurora," she called before I had a chance to escape.

She looked down, twirling one of the drawstrings from her shorts around her finger.

"Fane really wanted to see you, so I gave him our address. I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner."

Before leaving, I tossed my hair back. "Don't worry about it."

I was tired of rehashing the past.

My relationships were complicated. Noel, Valerie and I played for the same team, which gave me a sense of loyalty toward my sister hunters even if they were two of the worst back-stabbers on the face of the planet. We had a blood blond, like family, and as with family, I couldn't choose who I shared blood type with.

That night, I dreamed Dante and I were in bed together. In the dream, I couldn't see him so much as sense him. I kept expecting him to tug at my pajama pants. Instead he nestled against me, murmuring "toasty" in a feminine voice. I was too tired to make sense of it. I snuggled against him, instead.

Starting class at ten had the added benefit of not requiring an alarm clock to shock me awake. With enough time I could rise naturally.

As my mind booted up, I became aware that I wasn't alone. Sometime during the night, I'd acquired a red-headed bedmate. She had her back to me, hair spilling over my pillow, tickling my nose.

I sat up. The blanket lifted with me, revealing Valerie beneath the bed sheets wearing only black lace panties and a matching bra. I suppose I should count myself lucky she left those on.

"Valerie, what are you doing in my bed?"

She groaned in response.

I scooted to the edge of the mattress and got out. Valerie groaned again when the covers slid with me.

I grabbed a fresh change of clothes from the dresser and walked out, shutting the door behind me. I showered, dressed, and headed down the stairs determined to enjoy what I could of the morning—alone.

I had just started to read next week's English assignment when I heard the stairs creak. So much for solitude. Valerie emerged shortly after, stumbling down the hallway, now dressed in her shorts and tank from the night before. She held a hand to her head and groaned.

"Is that toast?" she asked, looking at my plate.

"Yes."

"Can I have some?"

"Help yourself." I scooted away from the table.

Valerie stuck a couple pieces of toast in the toaster before dropping into a chair at the head of the table and slumping down.

"Too much rum?" I asked.

"Oh my god, don't even say that word." Valerie folded her arms over the table and laid her head down.

I rested my back against the counter.

"What were you doing in my bed?" I asked.

"It got cold down here. You left me with only a thin blanket and no pillows."

"You looked so peaceful. I didn't want to disturb you."

"Luckily I crawled into bed with you and not Noel." Valerie said. "I don't sleep with just anyone."

The toaster clicked off. Valerie dragged her ass off the chair and grabbed each piece, tossing them onto a plate.

She looked in the fridge

"Got any Strawberry jam?"

"Nope, blueberry."

"Guess I'll have butter. Tell me you have coffee."

"We do, but you'll have to make it yourself."

Valerie grumbled. "Can't you?"

"Nope, don't know how. I'm a tea drinker," I said, lifting my mug.

Valerie began searching the cabinets until she found Noel's coffee stash. She didn't sit down with her toast until she'd brewed a cup.

Between sips she said, "Tonight I'm putting way less rum in our drinks."

"Tonight I'm spending time with my mom."

"Your mom?" Valerie asked in disgust.

The time had come to check out her French teacher. I hadn't planned on sharing my suspicions with anyone. If it turned out to be nothing, I didn't want to sound paranoid. Then again, on the off chance that something happened to me, it would be good for at least one person to know where I'd gone and why. Could I trust Valerie with my thoughts?

I looked at her. She glared back.

Probably not, but what the hell?

"I'm tagging along to her French lesson."

"Wow, you two really know how to have fun," Valerie said as she chewed her toast.

"I want to make sure her teacher isn't a vampire."

Valerie stopped chewing only long enough to ask, "Why would her teacher be a vampire?"

"Because the teacher before her was in an accident and the replacement is a young, blonde, French woman."

"So?"

Did I have to spell it out?

"What if it's Giselle?" I asked. "What if she followed us here and is keeping tabs on me through my family?"

Valerie stopped chewing. "Are you for real? That chick was unconscious. Never saw us. No one knew us in Sitka, and we didn't use our real names. There's no way she could have tracked us down unless Jared tipped her off."

My jaw tightened. I hadn't considered that. "You think Jared would tell her who we are?"

Valerie shrugged. "He failed to take us down, so maybe he put his darling daughter on our tail."

"But he was trying to kill her."

"And then he tried to kill us," Valerie said. "He probably wants us all dead. If Giselle takes us out, he only has to go after one vampire rather than two hunters."

I clutched my chest. "Oh my god, what am I going to do?"

Valerie got up and went to her purse. "Take my gun." She pulled out the pistol from the bottom of her purse and handed it to me.

I felt oddly touched. I guess I wasn't the only one committed to my teammates.

"Thank you, Valerie."

"Just make sure to return it to me. If you don't get killed first, that is."

"As always, I appreciate your vote of confidence," I said sarcastically.

Valerie lifted her chin. "One can never be too prepared."

My thoughts exactly.

I ended up confiding in my mom, as well. It would be safer, and less distracting, if Grandma stayed home. Mom told Gran that class had been canceled and that she and I were going to have some mother-daughter time on the town, instead.

"I've always worried about you," Mom said after she picked me up at my place. "I never thought my life or your grandma's would be in jeopardy."

"This is most likely nothing," I answered. "I just want to make sure."

"You said you saved this girl in Sitka?" Mom asked as she drove.

"That's right."

"So maybe she wants to thank you."

I snorted. "Fat chance."

"I don't understand why she'd have any desire to hurt you."

"Because she was a target. Her entire family was, and our team leader took them all out. Everyone except for her. She's not going to want to thank me. She's going to want to avenge her family."

Mom's forehead wrinkled. "If she was a target why did you disobey orders?"

“Because she had nothing to do with the murder we were investigating.” I ground my teeth together. This was way too hard to explain. If I told my mom about Jared, she’d worry more than she already did and go to Melcher for sure. “And I had no reason to believe she’d ever track me down. She never saw me. Plus I was undercover.”

“You wore a disguise?”

“No, but the point is, she never set eyes on me. She was unconscious.”

We weren’t at the learning center yet, and stress had already set in. I should probably work on my breathing so I would walk in with a clear head.

“But why would you disobey orders?” Mom asked.

“Because I hate to kill! Okay? Is that reason good enough for you?” My brain felt like it had exploded. Why couldn’t anyone understand my moral dilemma? It was as if I was screaming so loud no one could hear what I was saying. We were all living inside the scream. Along the way, everyone had gone deaf and stopped covering their ears.

The car went completely silent. I felt bad for yelling, but I hadn’t been able to keep it in any longer. Mom would say something in a moment. Some mumbo jumbo about regret and having no choice, words that would both annoy me and trigger guilt.

Mom inhaled sharply. “This is never what I wanted for you, Aurora.”

So predictable. I folded my arms.

“I had two choices: watch you die or give you a chance to live. I made the right decision, the only decision. Any mother would do the same.”

Mom sounded less guilty and more defiant this time. She really had changed.

“One day, when you have children of your own, you’ll understand.”

Her words cut me. My arms dropped. A stab of pain ached inside my chest. I had no desire for children now, but that didn’t mean I wouldn’t someday. It was yet another decision stolen from me. I felt as if I didn’t have ownership over my own body.

Tears gathered in the corners of my eyes. Mom was angry and watching the road, so she didn’t see.

I wanted to tell her I’d never have children, to say it out loud, to hear it for myself. I wanted to make her feel bad for the terrible thing she’d just said. I tried to, but every time I did, the words wouldn’t form, like they’d choke me if I said them.

Mom sighed. “Honey, I don’t want to fight. You are such an amazing young woman. So strong and brave. I don’t want you to spend your whole life regretting the past.”

A mother’s words of wisdom. Maybe she should become a motivational speaker.

I blinked back my tears, focusing instead on a passing car full of kids. Oh how the universe mocked me. I looked away from them.

“I don’t regret the past, I just don’t like to kill.”

"Maybe you should try thinking of it as saving lives. Isn't that what Agent Melcher says?"

"Melcher's full of shit."

"Aurora…" Mom looked over her shoulder before changing lanes.

"It's the truth."

"And what about me?" she asked, an angry quiver in her voice. "Do you think I'm full of shit, too?"

"Of course not. You're my mother. You care about me, unlike Melcher, who only sees me as government property."

Mom put on the blinker and entered the turn lane at the next intersection. Once we'd stopped, she looked at me. "I'm sure he cares about you, honey. He wants you to be strong and healthy."

Strong so I could kill vampires. It all came back to killing. I didn't mention this again. I'd brought it up too many times to count. Sometimes the best answer was no answer.

The light took forever to change. When I looked over, Mom rubbed her lips together, expression somber. "What's your plan?"

"I'm gonna go in and check it out. It's probably not her, but just to be sure."

"I'll go in with you."

"No way," I said. "You're staying in the car with the doors locked."

"But how will you know who she is?"

"If it's Giselle, I'll recognize her. I might not have ever looked into her eyes, but I hauled her skinny carcass down three flights of stairs. And if I don't see her, I'll ask for Madame Vasser and meet a woman I've never seen before, which is what I expect to happen tonight."

"Better safe than sorry," Mom said.

I nodded. "Exactly."

"What will you do if it's Giselle?"

"I'll do what I've been trained to—kill."

Mom chewed on her lower lip.

"No one threatens my family," I added.

"Madame Vasser never threatened me or your grandma."

"If it's Giselle, her very presence is a threat."

The arrow turned green. Mom drove.

"You'd think I would have noticed if she was a vampire," Mom said, "especially since I'm one of the few people aware they exist."

Mom: Vamp Detector. Just what I didn't need to be worrying about, but I might as well get as much information from her as I could in case the teacher turned out to be a vindictive bloodsucker.

"Tell me everything you can about your teacher. Did she have a temper? Did you ever see her with anyone else? Any noticeable defects? Right handed? Left handed?"

"Oh, okay, let me think," Mom said, sitting forward in her seat. She

moved her hands to the top of the steering wheel. “She never lost her temper, but she did get this angry look in her eye whenever one of us pronounced a word wrong, or if someone walked in even a minute late.”

Strict and punctual? Sounded like a killer vampire to me.

“She always struck me as a bit cold,” Mom continued. “It didn’t occur to me that she could be a vampire. I thought it was because she’s French. I wish I could tell you more, but that’s about it. I’ve never seen her interacting with anyone before or after class.”

“Has she ever asked you any personal questions, like if you have a daughter?”

Mom shook her head. “No. She sticks to the lesson plans.”

I didn’t want to believe Giselle had tracked me down. It seemed impossible unless, as Valerie suggested, Jared tipped her off. I still had a hard time believing that one, but when my mom talked about the teacher, a clear image formed in my head of Giselle.

You’re being paranoid, I told myself. No doubt about it.

I wondered if Giselle knew about vampire hunters, or if I could get her to somehow bite me first if she turned out to be the teacher.

“Here we are,” Mom said, flicking on her blinker. She turned into the career center’s parking lot. It was only about a fourth full. “Where should I park?”

“Just drop me off up front, and I’ll find you.”

“You have your phone, right?” Mom asked.

“Yeah, I have my phone.” And a gun. No problem.

Mom drove up to the curb. I turned to her. “Remember, lock the doors and don’t open up for anyone, but me.”

Mom frowned. “What if you don’t come back out?”

“If I’m not out in the next half hour, call Dante.”

Mom’s forehead wrinkled. “Shouldn’t we call him now?”

“No. Not until I check it out.”

“Okay, well, be careful,” she called after me as I exited the vehicle.

“Lock the doors,” I said over my shoulder.

Once outside, I headed for the building’s entrance. There were multiple sets of glass doors leading inside. On the phone earlier, Mom had explained which room their French lessons took place in. I took a right after entering the building, followed by a left. I walked halfway down the hall and took a final left into room 138. The door was propped open.

“*Bonjour*,” a stocky forty-something brunette sang out when I called in.

“*Bonjour*,” I replied flatly.

“*Je m’appelle Susan. Et vous?*”

“Aurora.”

Her smile extended like an animated clown. “*C’est jolie.*”

“Thanks,” I said, in no mood to banter around in French. “I need to speak with Madame Vasser. Is she here?”

"*Non. Elle n'est pas arrivée.*"

Wasn't going to drop the French, was she?

"I guess I'll wait," I said, taking a seat near the back.

"Rachael, *mon amie! Comment ça va?*" Susan called out enthusiastically to the next woman who entered the room.

I kept my backpack, with the gun inside, in my lap and my eye on the door. The lesson was supposed to begin at eight p.m. It was three minutes to eight. Where was this anal teacher? I suppressed a sigh. I just wanted to get a quick look at her and be on my way. I had my own studying to do. Waking up to Valerie had wrecked my day's schedule.

At exactly eight o'clock, the room got quiet all of the sudden. Students began exchanging looks.

"*Où est Madame Vasser?*" Susan asked.

The man beside her shrugged.

I drummed my nails over the desk I'd selected. A guy looked over at me, and I stopped.

Five minutes later, we all turned in our seats when a grey-haired woman entered the room. Her clogs tapped the floor heavily as she made her way to the front of the room. She stopped when she'd reached the center front.

"*Bonjour*," she said.

"*Bonjour*," the room echoed. Everyone, but me. Where was Blondie?

"My name is Madame Ellis. I am taking over for Madame Vasser."

"Will Madame Vasser be back?" a guy in the front row asked.

"No. From now on, I will be your French instructor."

"Third one in two months," someone muttered beside me.

"What happened to Madame Vasser?" Susan asked, dropping the French.

I shoved aside my dismay at the teacher's failure to appear. At least her students were asking the questions for me.

"I don't know," the replacement instructor said. "But if you don't mind, I'd like to get started."

That was my cue to leave. The teacher wasn't here. There wasn't any reason to keep my mom waiting in the car, worrying. I slid my butt to the edge of the seat, prepared to lift up and leave as inconspicuously as I could.

"Aurora Sky," the instructor called out suddenly.

I froze in place. She'd caught me trying to sneak out. I felt momentarily disorientated.

Wait a minute. This wasn't one of my classes, and I'd never seen this teacher before in my life. How did she know my name?

"Is there an Aurora Sky here?" she asked.

The room filled with blank stares. Students began looking around. I joined them. Was this a trick? If I raised my hand would a sniper take me out?

"Hey, didn't you say your name was Aurora?" a woman asked.

Good old wants-to-speak-French Susan. And she asked loud enough for everyone, including Madame Ellis, to hear.

"Yeah," I said. "That's me."

The instructor walked toward me. I tensed. What if she was working with Giselle? Should I pull the gun out? Before I could decide, Madame Ellis produced a white envelope and held it out to me.

"Madame Vasser wanted you to have this."

Students turned in their seats to stare at me.

"Who is she?" someone whispered.

I stood up, took the envelope from the woman's outstretched hand, and left the room. Once I'd entered the hallway, I quickly looked in either direction in case Giselle had waited for me to come out, but other than two adults conversing in front of a classroom, the hall was empty. I hustled along the corridor.

The envelope shook slightly in my hand. AURORA SKY was spelled out in clean handwriting.

After rounding a corner and checking that the coast was clear, I stopped and leaned my back against a locker. My heart beat a little harder against my chest. Part of me actually felt relieved. I'd made a mistake saving Giselle. I realized that later. As long as she was out there, I'd always have to worry about whether she'd find me and what she'd do if she did. Now the wait was over. This one was on me to clean up.

I tore open the envelope, expecting a handwritten note, a threat, an "I found you" or "Better watch your back." But there was no correspondence waiting inside, only news clippings—three obituaries.

Andre, Henriette, and Etienne Morrel.

Each of their supposed ages were listed. Their date of deaths were all the same, as was the cause of death: a robbery gone bad. They were all three survived by their daughter/sister, Giselle.

I slipped the obituaries back inside the envelope and put it into my backpack before continuing down the hall to the parking lot.

Mom was parked in a front row spot, wearing sunglasses despite the fact that the sun had set during my absence. She took them off when she saw me. I walked around to the passenger's door, and the locks sprung up. Good, she's listened.

Once I sat down and shut the door, she hit lock again.

"I didn't hear any gunshots," she said.

"She wasn't there."

"She wasn't?"

"Nope, but it's her all right. Giselle tracked me down."

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13
Fight or Flight

Dante opened his front door shortly after I knocked.

"Hello, Mrs. Sky," he said as my mom followed me inside.

We'd barely entered when Tommy came bounding forward from the living room in a mass of golden fur.

"Tommy!" I cried out.

He panted happily as I patted his head.

"How have you been, buddy?"

Tommy's tail wagged in response.

Our group moved into the living room—a space with a couch, a La-Z-Boy recliner, and a ginormous flat screen TV. A stack of pizza boxes covered an end table, probably because the coffee table was already too full of magazines.

Dante had tried multiple times to get me over, and now here I was… with my mom under duress. Not quite the romantic rendezvous he'd anticipated. But if there was one thing that could be said for Dante, he was game for anything.

Once I had proof that Giselle had managed to pinpoint my identity and whereabouts, I'd called Dante and brought him quickly up to speed. I could have tried Valerie, but I wanted help from someone who actually cared about me and my family. There wasn't anyone better for the job than Dante.

"Please excuse the mess," Dante said, sweeping an arm into the living room. "I would have picked up, but I did a little research after you called. Mrs. Sky, can I get you anything?"

Mom shook her head. "No thank you, Dante."

"What kind of research?" I asked.

Dante nodded at the couch. "Make yourselves comfortable."

Tommy followed me over to the end of the couch, settling onto his hind legs. I stroked the soft fur on his head. Mom took the spot beside me and folded her hands in her lap. We looked at Dante, who'd walked around the coffee table and taken a stand in front of us.

"I popped online and did a bit of reading on the Daily Sitka Sentinel. I found the obituaries you were given. I also found an article about the murder investigation."

I stopped petting Tommy and leaned forward.

"The paper stated that two women were suspected of breaking and entering the Morrel household and killing the entire family except for a teenage girl who got away. It also said that a detective had followed them to Sitka into the Morrel's household, where he tried to apprehend the women

before one of them shot him."

"What detective?" I demanded, already knowing the answer.

"Detective Jared James."

"You mean Just Jared?"

Dante nodded. "The one and only."

"That's outrageous! So he's framing Valerie and me."

That rat! That slime! That spawn of Satan and all that was unholy in the world.

My heart raced inside my chest. I felt like hurling a pizza box across the room. Better yet, I felt like traveling back in time and aiming Valerie's gun directly at Jared's cold, black heart.

Dante slipped around the coffee table and sat on the couch's armrest. He put his hand on my shoulder gently. "Don't worry, we'll straighten this out. This is what Melcher gets for employing a vampire."

Mom's head snapped up. "You work with a vampire?"

"Only on one mission," I said.

"But why would Agent Melcher hire a vampire?"

Dante leaned forward, addressing my mom. "I intend to find out tomorrow afternoon."

"Dante…" I started.

"I have to go in, anyway," he said. "Time for my monthly injection." He tapped the inside of his arm with two fingers.

I shook my head. "Melcher's just going to give you some bull crap answer. When I confronted him after the mission, he told me that Jared was atoning for past sins and that his position within the agency was classified. He referred to the man as a loyal member of the team and top recruiter." And oh how that praise boiled my blood.

"No doubt Melcher believes that," Dante said. "The man's too trusting."

"Trusting? He's a liar!" I exclaimed. "I asked him how he got Jared released from police custody in Sitka. He told me the police were informed that Jared was an undercover agent who'd been tracking down a family with terrorist ties, and that when he showed up to question them, they began shooting, and he had no choice but to return fire." I growled in disgust. "Now we have proof that's not what he told the police at all. Maybe I should be checking the FBI's Most Wanted list for my picture."

"Already checked," Dante said with perfect ease. "You're not on their website."

This was shaping up to be a fantastic homecoming. Henry suspected me for Marcus' murder, Giselle had tracked me down, and now, possibly, the police were after me for the murder of the Morrel family.

Just when I thought the worst was behind me.

I straightened my back. "First things first. How do we find Giselle?"

Dante grinned. "I like the way you think—eliminate the biggest threat."

I would have thought Jared was the biggest threat, but as far as I knew,

he had no intention of harming my family. Giselle, however, had posed as their French teacher. Maybe I should convince Valerie to get involved. Evil Red vs. Baddie Blonde. All bets on Red!

At the very least, I needed to warn Valerie. If Giselle had figured out who I was, it was safe to conclude she knew about Valerie as well. I should probably tell Noel, too, in case the She-Vamp came looking for me at the house.

"I need to warn our whole team," I said. "Valerie, Noel, and Melcher, even though he's going to say this is my fault for letting her go."

"I'll tell Melcher when I go in tomorrow," Dante said. "And I'll talk to Harper and Red. You just worry about your family."

Dante looked so solid and stoic sitting beside me. There were times, like now, when I felt my heart expanding with love for him.

"I'll call Valerie," I said. "And I'm spending the night at Gran's."

I wouldn't actually be sleeping. I'd be on night watch. I still had the gun Valerie lent me. I didn't like guns, but I was beginning to think it would be a good idea to get my own. Giselle could have easily followed Mom and Gran home after class.

I turned to my mom. "You and Gran will have to leave town. It's not safe here. I can't stand guard all the time and track Giselle down."

Dante nodded. "Aurora's right. Do you have someplace you can hole up until it's safe?"

Mom scratched her chin. "We'll go to Florida," she said suddenly. "Mom keeps talking about all the things she has to sort out in storage. She hasn't been through any of it since Aurora's grandfather died. I told her I'd help her out this winter. I'll tell her we should go now."

"She'll be suspicious," I said.

"Better suspicious than dead," Dante said.

Mom nodded. "I'll find a reason, a tennis tournament or something happening this weekend." Her face lit up. "Better yet, I'll tell her I ran into Aurora's dad and his mistress and need a change of scenery right away."

I frowned. "Should I be worried about Dad?"

Ever since he walked out of our lives, he hadn't worried about me. He hadn't attempted to contact me once. But he was still my father. Better a deadbeat dad than a dead corpse dad.

As I chewed on my lower lip, Mom set a hand on my leg. "If you warned your father, you'd have to tell him everything, and that would only endanger him more."

I took a deep breath. "He wouldn't believe me, anyway."

Dante gave my shoulder a squeeze. "Don't worry, Aurora," he said. "We're going to get her, and everything will return back to normal."

Normal. There was no such thing, unless you called hunting vampires normal.

Sometime around two in the morning I'd entered slumber land, deciding I wouldn't be much help to my family if sleep deprivation turned me into a zombie. Vampire vs. Zombie. No-brainer. Pun intended.

"Dana, have you seen my floral shawl?" Grandma called out.

I woke up when Gran barged into her office, where I'd been snoozing a second earlier. I rubbed my eyes with my fists.

"Hello, sleepy-head," Gran said, giving me a pat on my head. "You didn't happen to see my floral shawl in here, did you?"

I shook my head. "Sorry, Gran." She smelled like lilacs. It tickled my nose. I sniffed.

She flicked her wrist in the air. "That's okay, I've got a pink one down in Florida."

The foldout bed dipped down when Gran took a seat beside me. Once I sat up, Grandma took my hand in hers. "Honey, I know this departure is sudden, but you remember what your mom was like right after Bill left. Neither of us wants to see that happen again."

I nodded my agreement, black tangles of hair falling forward as I did. "I understand."

Gran sucked in a deep breath and released it. "She's been so happy these past six months. I won't let Bill ruin that."

I kissed her on the cheek. "You're a good mother, and a wonderful grandma."

Gran patted my hand. "And you're a great granddaughter. I realize we're leaving you after you only just returned to town."

"That's okay. If I'd gone to college out of state, we wouldn't be having this conversation to begin with."

Gran patted my hand, silent for several seconds until her eyebrows lifted at the same time as her smile. "I've got it! How about Christmas in Florida? Dante's invited, too of course, but I imagine his own family will want to spend the holidays with him."

I sighed wistfully. "I'd love to spend Christmas in Florida."

Grandma gave my hand a tight squeeze. "Then why not?"

I shrugged. "Dante might want me to meet his family." Or Melcher might want me to stick around to battle vampires in North Pole, Alaska. "But I'd like to come."

"So come!"

Sunny Florida… yes, please! Relaxing in a tropical paradise would beat boot camp in the high desert any day of the week. I'd ask Melcher. There had to be vacation time, even in the vampire hunting business.

"Maybe," I said slowly.

"I don't want to hear another word about it," Gran said. "I'm buying you a ticket."

Even better. How could Melcher say no to that? What excuse could he possibly give if my own grandmother bought the ticket? And it wasn't just a vacation. It was Christmas for crying out loud!

Last Christmas had been a complete wash. My mind had been absent after the accident until Melcher shocked it back to life during initiation. That's how I ended last year. How would this year end? In Florida with my family. I was determined.

"Thanks, Gran," I said, giving her a quick hug.

Mom walked in as I pulled my arms back and smiled briefly before turning to Gran.

"I told you not to wake her," Mom said.

Gran patted her impeccably coiffed Helen Mirren hair.

"She was already up, and guess what, Dana? Aurora is spending Christmas with us in Florida."

Mom looked at me with a wide smile. "You are? Oh, honey, we'll have a great time."

"Can't wait," I said.

Grandma lifted herself off the bed. "I need to finish packing, and I imagine you need to get ready for school. What time's your first class?"

"Ten."

"So hop to it."

I glanced at Mom.

"Chop, chop," Gran said.

"Mom," my mother said.

"What? It's nine o'clock. She needs to get her butt in gear or she'll be late for school."

"Don't say that word."

"Butt? It's better than saying ass."

Mom took a deep breath. "Let's give Aurora a little privacy so she can get ready."

"That's exactly what I was trying to do," Gran said as she walked out.

Mom shot me an apologetic smile.

"It's fine," I said. "I managed to get some sleep."

"Good. I'll drive you to campus."

"I'm not going to school."

I had promised myself I wouldn't miss a single class, not at college, no matter what Melcher said. But I wasn't skipping school for a mission. This was for my family.

Mom clucked her tongue. "I don't want you to miss class. If you stop living your life, the enemy's already won."

I rolled my eyes. "I think you've read too many books. Besides, I'm only missing one day."

"I insist," Mom said.

"You can insist all you want. I'm not going to class until you and

grandma are either in the air or in Florida."

"Wait here a moment," Mom said.

That's exactly what I planned on doing—waiting around until Mom and Gran got the hell out of dodge.

After Mom left the room, I swung one foot after the other to the ground and stretched both arms high in the air, yawning. I turned and set to work folding the blanket, sheets, and putting the sofa back together. Mom returned as I pushed the folded springboard into place. I grabbed the first cushion, glancing at her purse, which she held up as though presenting a corsage to a prom date.

Mom pulled out a small revolver and grinned wide.

"What are you doing with a gun?" I dropped the second cushion.

Mom's smile wavered like she was disappointed I hadn't shown more enthusiasm.

"It's for protection against vampires. I know how to use it, too. I took shooting lessons all summer."

Between tennis tournaments. Of course she did.

Mom held the gun, barrel pointed up. "The point is, I'm perfectly capable of defending myself and your grandmother should the occasion arise. I also know what Giselle looks like, so she's lost the element of surprise."

I gave the last cushion a firm push into place.

"Only she doesn't want the element of surprise," I said. "If she did, she wouldn't have taken over your French class or left me such obvious clues."

Mom's forehead wrinkled. "What do you suppose she wants?"

"To scare me," I answered. "She thinks I'm responsible for her family's death. Now she's threatening mine, which is why I'm not going anywhere until I see your plane take off."

Mom lowered the gun. "Can't you get a message to her that it wasn't your fault—that you actually saved her?"

I shook my head. "She won't care."

"How do you know?"

I stared at my mom. "Because this woman lost the only family she's had for the past two centuries. Because she's a vampire. A cold-blooded-killer, according to Melcher. The only thing she'll care about is avenging her family's death."

I didn't need to know Giselle to figure out her motives. Mom wasn't the only one who'd read and seen enough shows to understand how this all worked.

Mom's shoulders slumped forward. "Can you at least study or work on a paper or something while I pack so I don't feel as bad?"

"That I can do," I said, snatching my backpack off the floor.

I spread my things out on the dining room table with a pot of tea while my mom and grandma finished packing. I tried to block them out and throw myself into my reading, but I had my eyes on my textbook and ears open to

everything else.

Shortly after five, Dante knocked on the door to take my family to the airport.

When I was little, Mom and I would see Grandma and Grandpa off at the airport every October right before they headed to Florida for the winter. Back then, we could walk right up to their gate and watch as they passed through the door leading to their plane.

That was before terrorism became a household name in homes across America. A different era. The world had changed, and not only for me. Life by definition had never been safe, but it was the realization of previously unknown dangers that made everything appear under a new light of uncertainty and fear.

I was more afraid to lose my mom than my own life.

I stood beside her in line at baggage check, watching each person ahead of us load their suitcase onto the belt and hand over their boarding pass and ID for the attendant to verify. I couldn't speak. An empty pit had formed in my stomach. I'd expected to feel relieved.

"I'm actually looking forward to extending the summer," Mom said. "I won't mind skipping the snow this year, though I've always loved having a white Christmas. But even that I won't mind missing, since you're coming down for the holiday."

I nodded my head, only half-listening. She'd chattered like this ever since we arrived at the airport.

"Aurora," Mom finally said, taking on a more serious tone.

There was only one person in front of her and Gran now. I turned my head to show her I was listening.

Her forehead wrinkled as she looked into my eyes.

"You don't have to worry about your grandmother and me anymore. Just worry about yourself and stay safe. Promise me I'll see you at Christmas."

Mom sounded so cheerful a moment ago that it hadn't occurred to me she was as worried as I was. Sometimes it seemed like she believed being a vampire hunter made me indestructible.

"You'll see me at Christmas," I said. "I promise."

"Good," she said, eyes brightening. "Now promise you won't miss any more classes."

"I'll try."

Mom twisted her lips into a frown. She was about to say something, but the person in front of her walked away, and it was her turn to put her suitcase on the luggage belt. I stepped back while she and Gran checked in one bag each.

Dante stood ten feet back, texting. He lowered his phone when I joined

him.

"They're going to be fine," Dante said.

Easy enough for him to say. I nodded slightly, keeping them in my sight.

Once their luggage was checked, our small group headed over to the security line.

I would have been happier walking through with them and watching their plane take off from the gate. Damn terrorists. Damn vampires. What was the world coming to?

My palms felt clammy. Being the one to leave had been much easier six months ago. Staying behind was so much harder.

Gran readjusted her silk scarf around her neck and checked her wristwatch. There was plenty of time before their flight, and the line at security only went back about twenty feet.

Five feet from the roped line, I stopped and threw my arms around my mom.

"I love you," I said quickly.

"Oh, honey," she said, squeezing me gently. "I love you more than you can possibly know."

"Take care of our little girl," Gran said, wagging one slender finger at Dante.

"I will, Abby."

I let the "little girl" comment go and gave Gran a hug, too.

"You take care, dear. Don't get into trouble. College is college. I don't care if it's not Notre Dame. You hit those books, and you hit them hard. Make us proud."

"She makes us proud every day," my mom said.

Gran nodded more in thought than agreement and gave me a final pat on the shoulder. "Ace all your tests, Aurora. I know you can do it if you put your mind to it."

For the first time that day, a smile twitched over my lips.

"Thanks for your vote of confidence, Gran."

"And you, young man," Gran said, turning to Dante. He started to smile until he saw she wasn't grinning.

"I like you," Gran said. "But if Aurora's grades drop I'm holding you personally responsible."

Yeah, Dante. I had to bite my tongue to keep from laughing, especially when he answered with a "Yes, Ma'am."

She turned back to me. "And no more of this missing class business."

My mom put her hand on Gran's arm. "Okay, Mom. We need to get going."

Gran's face brightened. "Right. Good-bye, dears," she said, blowing kisses at Dante and me. "Take care, and we will see you soon."

"Bye, Gran. Bye, Mom." I waved even though they were only two feet in front of me.

Mom gave me a kiss on the cheek and whispered one last “Be safe” before joining Gran down the maze of ropes leading to the X-ray machines. Dante and I stood outside the roped area watching in silence. Before proceeding to the security belt, Mom turned around and gave me one last little wave.

I waved back.

“They’re safe now,” Dante said, once they disappeared into the terminal beyond security.

I felt annoyed more than anything else.

They weren’t safe.

What if their plane crashed? What if a drunk driver hit their cab on the way home from the airport? What if burglars thought Grandma was still out of town and burst in on them in the middle of the night and shot them dead?

They would never be safe.

I took a deep breath. Not helpful, Aurora. Not helpful at all.

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14
Target

"So how do we find Giselle?" I asked, watching the security line long after my mom had disappeared from sight.

"We don't," Dante said.

"Let me guess. We let her find me." When I looked at Dante, he smiled.

"We're like one mind," he said.

I rolled my eyes. We headed for the escalators.

"What did Melcher say this afternoon?" I asked.

"He said he's been ready for Giselle for the past six months. He has all his Anchorage informants keeping an eye out for her, including Noel."

"Noel?" I repeated.

"I think we should talk to her now," Dante said.

My frown deepened.

"Do it for your family."

I nodded. I'd do anything for my family, even if it meant collaborating with Noel and taking orders from Melcher.

"Fine," I said. "So long as we take care of Giselle quickly. I want to lure her out this weekend."

Dante shook his head. "Can't. Melcher wants us back at Diederick's next tasting."

My spine straightened. "I don't care about tastings! I've got bigger problems to deal with."

I started walking faster, several steps ahead of Dante. The last thing I planned on doing this weekend was twiddling my thumbs at some stupid highfalutin vamp party while Giselle roamed free.

When Dante caught up to me, I said, "You can go to the tasting. I'm taking care of Giselle."

"Hey," he said, touching my cheek. "We're in this together, but we've still got orders to follow."

I turned my face away. Dante could be so frustrating.

"Here's a little something that will cheer you up," he continued. "This weekend, we've got our first hit, and you get to do the honors."

All I could do was stare at him, and the more I stared at him, the more it sunk in that he wasn't kidding. Dante thought he was delivering good news. Like one mind. More like polar opposites.

Nothing like the threat of a vampire to put me in a funk. I didn't want to be annoyed at Dante. He wasn't the problem. The problem was Giselle. Melcher. Jared.

I sighed. "Who's the target?"

“Melcher wouldn’t tell me—said he’ll go over the plan with the three of us tomorrow afternoon.”

“Of course.”

Dante gave me a soft push on the shoulder and smiled. “Come on, Noel’s expecting us. I texted her while you were saying bye to your mom.”

The three of us stood in the kitchen drinking mugs of coffee Noel had prepared. Usually I preferred tea, but right now I needed something stronger.

Turned out Noel had nothing useful to share with us about Giselle. Six months ago, Melcher had shown her a photo of the blond vampire and told her to keep an eye out. Real helpful. At Dante’s urging, I shared the obituaries Giselle had left me, taking them right back as soon as Noel finished reading.

“I’ve seen no sign of her at any vamp parties,” Noel said, glancing at the news clippings in my hands.

I leaned back against the kitchen counter next to Dante. Noel stood across from us, decked out in a cropped floral top that showed off her flat, tanned midriff. She wore a matching short flared skirt and orange strappy sandals. About the only thing familiar about her was the look of concern that appeared on her face the second she heard Giselle had made contact.

Noel threaded her copper highlights through her fingers.

“Did you ask the new French teacher or the school if they knew how to reach Giselle?”

I frowned. That was a good idea. I wished Noel hadn’t been the one to come up with it.

“The moment I knew Giselle found me, I stayed with my family, and I’ve been with them every moment until they left this afternoon,” I said, not intending to sound defensive.

“Of course,” Noel said. “I’d be more than happy to check into it, if you like.”

“I’ll do it,” I said.

Noel looked from Dante to me and said, “I think it’s safe to assume she knows where you live.”

Dante turned to me. “You should stay with me until we eliminate the threat.”

My brain searched for an excuse. Current circumstances didn’t make me feel romantic in the least, but somehow I doubted that would thwart his libido.

“What about Noel?” I asked when no viable reason presented itself.

“I’m perfectly fine on my own,” Noel said. “Giselle probably thinks I’m nothing more than a roommate. It’s more likely that she’ll have her eyes on the people closest to you.” Noel looked at Dante. “Family, friends… a boyfriend.” She rose one perfectly shaped eyebrow.

Dante rocked against the counter.

"Harper's right. You don't need my protection, I need yours." He turned to me with a sly grin and leaned forward, blocking Noel from sight. Dante's breath slid down my collar bone when he tilted his face down, and in a whisper asked, "What do you say Aurora? Will you be my personal body-guard day and night?"

Noel saved me from answering immediately when she cleared her throat and said, "I thought you already had the best body guard."

My breathing space opened up when Dante leaned against the counter and turned to Noel.

"Don't you have a highly trained vampire guard dog?" she asked, chuckling.

"Tommy? He'll sound the alarm. Not so good with a knife though." Dante winked.

"Have you met Tommy?" I asked.

"Yeah," she said with a shrug. "When Dante and I went on stakeout in Fairbanks last February."

Great, so Noel had cuddled up to Dante's dog, too? I looked at Dante.

"You brought Tommy with you on stakeout?"

Dante tilted his head when he looked at me. "Tommy loves the drive to Fairbanks and no one can sneak up on me when he's around."

"It sounds to me like you're perfectly safe at home," I said.

Dante nodded. "Exactly why you should stay with me. Your mom would want me to keep you safe."

Yeah, safe, not screwed.

I sighed. "I'll pack a bag for tomorrow night in case I notice anything funny at the tasting or anyone following us."

Dante smiled big. "Good thinking. We can celebrate your kill."

Because killing was something to celebrate. I made no answer. Dante didn't seem to require one. He'd gotten his way for the weekend, at least partially. I would only stay over if I noticed anything suspicious—as a good friend looking out for her comrade—but I wouldn't sleep with him. I cared too much about our relationship to ruin it. I just needed to find a way to explain that to Dante.

He kissed me on the forehead. "Pick you up for our meeting with Melcher tomorrow afternoon? Call me if you see any sign of Giselle. Call me even if you get a funny feeling."

I nodded. "Thanks, Dante."

"Later, Harper," he said as I led him out of the kitchen.

Once we reached the foyer, I stopped and hugged Dante. It was a quick embrace, one I hoped conveyed that my feelings for him, no matter how muddled, were genuine. There were very few people I felt close to. Dante, for all his quirks, was one of them.

He grinned as soon as I pulled back.

"We'll get through this," he said. "We always do, and we always come

out on top."

Friday afternoon, Dante and I took seats in front of Melcher. At my insistence, we had arrived early so I could discuss Giselle with Melcher. I'd called the school about "Madame Vasser" the day before. They said she no longer worked for them, and that they couldn't give out her personal contact information. So I'd called Melcher and asked him to pull some strings. It all came to nothing. The number the school had on record had been disconnected, and the only address they had on file was for a PO Box paid for in cash.

Melcher waved a dismissive hand in the air. "Now that we know Giselle is in Anchorage, we'll be able to corner and catch her. I have over two dozen agents assigned full-time to Miss Morrel. The girl doesn't stand a chance."

Dante looked at me with a full-toothed smile.

I wished I could feel as reassured as they did.

Valerie strutted inside at five minutes to three, frowning when she saw Dante and me. "Did you start without me?" she demanded.

"No," I said. "We were just discussing Giselle."

Valerie's frown deepened. "So you did start without me."

"Miss Ward, please close the door," Melcher said. "No one in this room is assigned to Miss Morrel. I'd like to discuss tonight's mission."

Valerie shut the door with a smack and placed herself in the space just behind and between Dante and me. Melcher took his place in the chair behind his desk.

"Thanks to the partial guest list Miss Ward compiled last weekend, I have our first target." Melcher looked at me. "Aurora, you'll make the kill."

"Who's the target?" I asked.

Melcher picked a file off his desk and handed it across to me. I reached forward and gripped the edge of the file. Once I had it, I flipped open the cover. When my eyes landed on the photo paper clipped inside, my heart dropped straight down like the New Year's ball in Times Square.

"This is Selene," I said in a faraway voice.

I always wondered if I'd ever be asked to kill a vampire I knew personally. I'd dreaded this moment, and now here it was, staring up at me from the surveillance photo that had fallen to my lap. In the picture, Selene sat outside of a café in the shade of a palm tree. There was a short silk scarf tied around her neck and glass of white wine on the table in front of her.

"Selene Ericson," Melcher confirmed.

"Uh, oh," Valerie said behind me. "Aurora has to kill her girlfriend."

How could Valerie tease me at a time like this? Selene had been nice. We'd played pool with her. She'd introduced Valerie to other guests. I didn't think the vixen was that heartless, but apparently I was wrong.

The only person who looked more upset than me was Melcher. He

ground his teeth together and glared at Valerie. “I don’t appreciate your jokes, Miss Ward.”

Valerie folded her arms and muttered, “I bet Dante does,” just loud enough for Dante and me to hear.

Before Dante could respond, I asked, “Why is Selene a target?”

Melcher’s eyes zoomed in on me. “Do you have some kind of attachment to this vampire?”

I glanced at the photo. “No,” I lied. “It just seemed like there were a lot worse vampires at the party—like Diederick.” And Henry. If Henry were gone, there’d be no one to pester me with questions about Marcus.

Melcher straightened. “If we kill the king, his subjects will scatter. We save Diederick for last.”

“Won’t they scatter if a vampire gets killed at the party?” I asked.

“That’s why you’re going to follow Selene or get her to take you home, where you will poison her and put her soul to rest. Call the cleaners afterwards. They’ll make it look like a car accident.”

Great, another car accident—one of the agency’s specialties. At least Valerie held her tongue at the part about getting Selene to take me home. I could see out of the corner of my eye that she had to press her lips together to refrain from commenting.

“Valerie goes with Aurora or follows her and Selene,” Melcher said. “Dante stays at the party playing the same role as last week.”

How was that fair?

“Why Selene?” I asked again.

Melcher stared at me in silence for several seconds before answering, “Selene is a threat to national security.”

I squinted. That still didn’t answer my question. I didn’t expect I would get an answer, so it surprised me when Melcher elaborated.

“She is sharing her existence—that of vampires—with the public. We could have a mass panic on our hands if she continues.”

Beside me, Dante nodded. “That’s not good.”

I thought back to last weekend at the tasting, and how someone had asked Selene about her trip back home. When the vampire Paul asked if her family was well, he probably meant her real family. How did she go about telling them she was a vampire? Did they not believe her at first? Had they accepted her existence over time? Did she frighten them? Was she an outcast?

I tapped my fingers lightly against the papers in Selene’s file. There were two addresses typed on the front page: one in Anchorage and one in San Diego. There was also a D.O.D., date of death, and in parentheses, the word “tuberculosis.” I closed the file.

I ran all through my head trying to find a viable reason not to kill Selene. Somehow, I doubted Melcher would go for the only suggestion to come to mind. Couldn’t we ask her not to tell people?

“All right,” Melcher announced. “Those are your assignments.”

Dante scooted his chair back. Valerie began to turn. I wanted to yell, "No," but no sound came from my throat. I sat in place, unable to move.

Melcher raised a brow. "Aurora, is there a problem?"

I shook my head. "No."

What else could I say? If I didn't terminate a target I wouldn't put it past Melcher to terminate me, or have Jared do it.

If I were dead, there wouldn't be anyone to keep my family safe from Giselle.

"Good. The cleaners will be waiting for your call."

I got off the chair and followed after Dante quickly.

Once all three of us were in the hallway, Valerie said, "This is going to be a cinch. Easiest assignment ever."

"It's the worst assignment ever," I said now that Melcher was out of earshot.

Valerie smiled slowly. "I see. So you do have feelings for her."

Rather than take the bait, I folded my arms. "So that's it? Selene befriends us and introduces you around, and you have no problem letting her die?"

Valerie mirrored my stance, crossing her arms.

"She should have kept her trap shut. People can't go running around telling the world about vampires. Like Melcher said, there'd be mass hysteria."

"She's got a family in California," I said. "Who can blame her for wanting to keep in contact with her loved ones?"

The color drained from Valerie's face. She sucked in her cheeks. I wasn't sure what I'd said to get such a reaction. An instant later, Valerie turned redder than the hair on her head and yelled, "Tough shit!"

The receptionist outside Melcher's office looked up and glared at all three of us.

"Voices," she said.

Valerie didn't spare the woman a glance. I wasn't so fortunate. She got right up in my face while Dante watched, eyebrows pinched.

"I've got a family in California, too. Everyone's got family. I have four sisters, and you know what? They all think I'm dead."

My body rocked slightly as though maintaining balance onboard a vessel caught on the waves of a gathering storm. I always assumed Valerie was an only child, certainly not one of five daughters. She rarely shared information about her past, and now that she had, I didn't know what to say. It was such a small morsel of the vixen's life before, and now it seemed momentous.

"I'm sorry," I finally said in a soft, sympathetic voice. I felt bad.

Valerie glared at me. "Oh, save it, Aurora," she snapped. "Your bleeding heart is the reason Giselle is after us. I'm not letting you make that mistake twice. If you don't shut Selene up tonight, I will."

With that, she spun on her heel and stormed down the hall.

"Pick you up tonight?" Dante called after her.

"I'll meet you there," Valerie hollered back without turning.

Dante looked at me with both brows raised. "What was that about?"

"Isn't it obvious?" I said, watching Valerie disappear around a corner. Once she was out of sight, I looked at Dante. "She'll never get to see her family again, so why should a vampire get visitation rights when she really is supposed to be dead?"

Dante glanced in the direction Valerie had gone. "Red's right. That can't be allowed."

A moment of silence passed. Usually I couldn't wait to get off the base, but all that meant to me now was going into battle and hoping to come out of it alive.

"I don't have a choice, do I?" An asteroid-sized lump formed in my throat. "I have to kill Selene."

Dante reached for my hand and gave it a squeeze.

"Just think, it will be over tomorrow," he said.

I didn't know how he could possibly think that helped.

That night's tasting took place at the same house on the hillside. Dante and I hadn't spoken much since he picked me up. He wore khaki slacks and a light blue and brown top. He looked good. As promised, I packed a bag with a pajamas, a change of clothes and toothbrush in case I had any reasons to believe Dante's life was at risk. I had slept on my grandma's couch. I could do the same for Dante if necessary. I looked out for family and Dante was like family to me.

I had on another long dress. This one was black to match my dark mood. I even wore heels, as it wasn't likely that Selene would turn down a taste of me. After that, she'd be no trouble at all. No phone cord necessary. I brought along a silver sequined clutch with only one item inside—a switchblade—no dress was complete without one.

Dante turned the music down.

"I wish I could kill her for you," he said.

I released my breath. "You can't." I stared out my window.

He tapped on the steering wheel. "How's your mother and grandmother?"

"Mom's already been out on a power walk today, and Gran's recovering from jet lag."

At least that was one less pit in my stomach. My loved ones seemed a lot safer now that they weren't at the epicenter of vampire activity. Alaska was one of the most beautiful places on the planet. Too bad so many of the residents were deadweights—literally.

Dante wound his way up the hill. The dirt road got steeper after he took a

turn up a road on the right.

"I think I took a wrong turn," Dante said.

"That's fine with me. Take all the wrong turns you want," I said.

We could tell Melcher we got lost and missed the party. Ha!

Dante turned into the next driveway and backed the Jeep up.

"I guess I didn't pay close enough attention the last time with Red yammering the whole way there."

"Don't look at me for help," I said.

Gravel pinged against the underbelly of the Jeep as we lurched down the hill to the road we'd taken a moment earlier.

"In a hurry?" I asked.

"Making up for lost time," Dante answered without braking at the bend. "The sooner we get there, the sooner you get it done."

"And the sooner it's over," I said.

"That's the spirit."

Dante drove along the mountain road until two unfortunately familiar stone posts lit up in the glare of the headlights. Dante steered between them, following the road up to the lodge.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

I squeezed the silver clutch against my stomach. "Ready or not, here I come."

Dante chuckled just as the bald man from last weekend walked up to his door.

"Good evening, sir, we are happy to have you back," he said as Dante stepped out.

As I reached for the door handle, my phone chimed.

Valerie: They're checking purses at the door and doing a pat down tonight.

I frowned, returned to the home screen, and shoved the clutch under my seat as Dante came around to open my door. He cocked his head sideways when he saw my expression.

"What is it?" Dante asked.

I shook my head, took his hand, and stepped out of the Jeep. I waited until the valet got into the Jeep and pulled forward.

"Valerie texted. They're checking purses at the door." I squeezed my phone in my palm. "I don't like this."

"Where's your purse?" Dante asked, looking at my hands, empty except for my phone.

"I stashed it under my seat."

"Okay, no reason to panic," he said, placing an arm around my shoulder. "You don't need it here, and I'd bet next month's rent that Valerie has several spare weapons you can borrow inside her car."

I nodded. That was likely true, but this still didn't sit right with me. What had Henry told Diederick about me? Suddenly I felt like I was walking into a trap. I shouldn't be here. This was bad strategizing on Melcher's part.

Foster, the butler from before, opened the front door after Dante knocked.

"Good evening, sir and madam."

Foster retrieved a small wicker basket from a shelf along the foyer wall. He brought it over and held it in front of us.

"Please place your cell phones in here. You may collect them on departure."

We set our phones in the basket simultaneously. That ought to make us look innocent. Thanks to Valerie's text, I wasn't surprised, though I still wasn't happy when Foster announced the new pat-down policy Diederick had issued.

Dante folded his arms. "You're not putting your hands on my girl."

"I understand perfectly, sir," Foster replied. "She is welcome to wait in your car."

My jaw dropped. Wait in the car? I didn't think so.

I walked up to Foster and spread my arms and legs. He missed my glare as he went to quick work patting one leg, followed by the other. The dress was sleeveless, so he skipped my arms. At least the whole thing took only a matter of seconds.

"You are clear, Ma'am."

I stepped aside.

Dante kept his arms folded while Foster patted his pants.

"Please hold out your arms," Foster said when he'd finished with Dante's legs.

Dante relaxed his arms slowly.

"Thank you for your understanding," Foster said. "I'm sure you will appreciate the security measures put forth by our host. They are only to ensure the safety of his guests."

Dante grunted. "All I can say is the selection better be good tonight."

Foster straightened. "Indeed it is, sir. A most excellent selection from Italy, including Amarone from the northern Veneto region near Venice, Barolo made entirely of Nebbiolo grapes, and Chianti produced in Tuscany."

Dante nodded as though he were a true wine connoisseur considering the selection. I stopped listening after Foster said "Italy." Italy didn't make me think of wine and grapes. It made me think of Fane.

"Would you like to go upstairs while I escort the lady downstairs?" Foster asked.

Dante shook his head. "No, I'll escort Aurora down first."

"Very good, sir. You may proceed to the rec room."

As we walked past the living room, I avoided looking at the spot where Selene sat and talked to me last weekend. Dante placed a light hand on the

small of my back as we descended the stairway.

We walked past the pool tables and entered the gathering in the next room. Tonight, the harpist had been replaced by a violinist.

"There's Red," Dante said.

I followed his eyes to the middle of the room, where Valerie stood in a bold green formal gown chatting with two men. Either she went shopping again or had dresses stashed aside for assignments like these.

I tried to catch her eye, but either she was engrossed in what the man beside her was saying, or she was ignoring me on purpose. At least she sent me a head's up about the new security checkpoint.

I searched the room for Selene, relief flooding me when her face didn't appear in the crowd.

"I don't see Selene. Maybe she's not here tonight," I said hopefully.

"Or maybe she's upstairs getting a taste of Tuscany," Dante countered.

He took my arm and led me gently towards the bar.

"Have a drink tonight," he said. "Just one to relax."

"I don't find alcohol relaxing," I said.

"Try a glass of red wine. It's what my mom has every evening to ensure a good night's rest. Red before bed." Dante winked.

"Maybe just one glass to sip while I'm waiting alone."

"Hopefully you won't be alone for long," he said.

We crossed the room to the bar. Rather than take a seat, I leaned against the counter. The bartender frowned when he saw me.

"I promise not to spill anything this time," I said, attempting to joke, but he didn't crack even a small smile.

Instead, he turned to Dante. "Would you like another Rodenbach?"

"Good memory," Dante said. "But no, I'm heading upstairs soon. I'd like to order a glass of red wine for my girl here—something relaxing."

"Absolutely," the bartender replied, sounding slightly more enthused. "Might I suggest a glass of Merlot?"

Dante looked at me, and I nodded. "That sounds fine."

While the bartender's back was turned to us, Valerie sauntered over, flipping her hair over her shoulder as she leaned against the counter beside Dante.

"Mr. and Mrs. Smith, how nice of you to show up," she said.

Dante grinned. "You miss us?"

"Not at all."

Dante smirked. "Did you run into some trouble at the door?"

Valerie huffed. "The butler felt me up and confiscated my brass knuckles, pistol, and pepper spray."

"He still let you in?" I asked in disbelief.

Valerie lifted one bare shoulder.

"I told him it's for my own protection, and he assured me there was no safer place than one of Diederick's tastings." Valerie's lips formed a

momentary pout. “He promised to return all my things on my way out. He better unless he wants to pay for all new replacements.”

I held back a sigh. Way to be inconspicuous, Val.

She waved her hand in the air. “Anyway, I came over to tell you that Paul over there owns this mansion.”

Valerie’s smile rose sharply when my jaw dropped.

“That’s right, this is all his,” she said, shaking out her hair behind her. “He’s giving me a private tour. Diederick might be able to make the rules during tastings, but Paul can take me wherever he wants, including a look-see upstairs.”

I shook my head slightly. Only Valerie could pull off something like this.

The bartender returned with a large wineglass, not quite half full.

“Enjoy,” he said quickly before turning away.

“You’re not going to walk in on people while they’re tasting, are you?” Dante asked.

Valerie’s pupils slid sideways to look at Dante. She smirked. “Don’t worry, Don Juan. We’re not going to bust in on you going oral on some hooch. Paul’s just gonna show me around. If one of the rooms happens to be unoccupied, I can have a quick look.”

I wondered what they used to signal a room was in use. Probably not a silver bat.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, it’s time for my private tour.” Valerie did a graceful pivot and headed back to Mr. Money Bags.

Dante rapped the countertop with his knuckle. “I better get upstairs before those two start holding up rooms. Will you be okay?”

I lifted my glass. “Got my own wine tasting.”

Dante touched my arm. “Text me your final location. I’ll pick you up stat.” He leaned forward, lips inches from my ear. “Good luck, Aurora. Be safe.”

I nodded once.

“You, too,” I said. “Good luck.”

Dante leaned back and quirked a brow. “Good luck sucking blood?”

I shrugged. “You never know when a drunk wine girl might get out of hand.”

He chuckled as he headed out. Despite his wanting to beat Valerie upstairs, she had a minute lead on him. Maybe Paul would start with the middle floor. Meanwhile, I had the bar to myself.

I took a small sip.

“Looks smooth, though I imagine it’s missing a hint of iron,” a man said behind me.

My head snapped to attention. I would have recognized that voice anywhere. I turned and faced Fane’s smirk.

“Aurora Sky,” he drawled in that maddening tone of his.

I really ought to keep away from open bars. Scratch that. I should stay

away from vampire gatherings completely.

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15
Suck Fest

Fane's idea of dressing up appeared to be a solid black long-sleeved button-up top—open at the neck—untucked over a pair of dark blue jeans. Black was back.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded.

"A little birdie told me where to find you. Plus, there's supposedly a 2001 Sandrone Cannubi Boschis Nebbiolo on the menu tonight. Barolo is one of the world's greatest red wines."

"Snob," I said.

Fane looked at the bartender. "I'll have what she's having."

The bartender nodded and turned away.

Fane set an elbow near mine on the counter.

I pulled my arm away.

Fane nodded in the direction of the king in his corner, once more flanked by his loyal subjects. "Diederick's been trying to get me on the list for over a year."

"How noble of you to resist," I said sarcastically.

"This isn't really my thing, but I made an exception for you. Thanks," he said when the bartender handed him a glass of red wine.

Little alarm bells went off inside me. I shouldn't be standing around making chitchat with Fane Donado. Dante and Valerie were upstairs and I was on assignment.

Fane raised his glass toward me. Like I was really going to make a toast with him.

"Does Joss know you're spending his hard earned cash on one night of drinking?" I asked.

Fane's roommate wasn't pleasant, but I imagine he worked hard to keep a roof over their heads and blood in the fridge while Fane went off and played high school delinquent.

Fane smirked. "What Joss doesn't know won't kill him."

I frowned. God, he was maddening.

"We can't be seen together," I said.

"Why not?"

"Valerie and Dante are upstairs."

Fane frowned for the first time. Good, maybe he was beginning to realize the seriousness of the situation.

"If anything happens here tonight, you are going to be in very big trouble, Aurora. Diederick doesn't mess around."

I caught the slight shake of Fane's head as I took a sip of wine.

"Sometimes I think you have a death wish," Fane said.

I moved the wine in a circle on the counter. I made sure the bartender was out of earshot before speaking into the glass. "I'm dead either way. If vampires don't get me, my organization will. As long as I do what I'm told, I get to see another day." I looked Fane in the eyes. "You're wrong, Fane. I don't have a death wish. I want to live."

"If you want to live, we should be working together."

I snorted. A vampire hunter team up with a vampire? That would be the day. And as much as I wanted it, I'd never be free. Melcher had too many resources. He had his own headquarters on base, a boot camp set up in the desert. If I deserted, he could set any number of recruits on me.

"That's never going to happen," I said.

My cage might be wider than the ones on base, but it was a cage nonetheless, and there was no escaping those bars. Without the agency, I'd have no antidote. Without the antidote, I'd turn into a vampire, possibly a drooling madwoman with no sense of reason. That, or I'd become a target, to say nothing of my family. What would happen to them?

Fane moved in closer. I was tall, but he stood a full three inches taller than I did. His eyes slid past my nose to my lips.

"I can be very persistent," he said.

I turned to my wine and took a quick sip. It was more of a big swallow that didn't go down quite right. I coughed several times before saying, "Please just leave me alone."

Fane studied me a moment before saying, "All right, Aurora. I'll leave you alone. For now. But we need to come up with a time and place where we can talk safely."

I nearly snorted wine out my nose. Being alone with Fane was never a good idea.

"I'm not leaving until you agree," he said.

"I'll call you tomorrow afternoon," I said quickly.

He needed to go before Valerie saw him and started World War III.

"Very well, talk to you soon, Aurora Sky."

Fane slid his wineglass across the counter, lifting it with his fingers as he left the bar. I didn't see where he went. I kept my back to the room.

I took another sip of wine, followed by another. I rooted myself to the counter, hoping Fane would leave the party entirely. Even if we weren't seen together, Dante and Valerie would flip if they saw him at all.

I finished the wine.

My body swayed. I leaned against the counter. The bottles behind the bar blurred. I blinked several times. When I tried to refocus, everything looked hazy again. God, when had I become such a lightweight? I blamed Fane. If anyone could throw me into a temporary tizzy, it was that maddening Man-Vamp.

Well, I had to say one thing—I felt relaxed.

"Pour you another?" the bartender asked.

He looked a bit blurry, too.

"One was enough, thanks," I said before pitching forward and catching myself on the counter.

"I can see that," the bartender said. He looked over my shoulder and jutted his chin up before walking away.

I tried turning to see who he'd been signaling, but a dizzy spell came over me when I moved my head.

Not good. On mission. Work to do.

I started to slip down the counter when strong arms steadied me.

"I don't need your help," I said, thinking it was Fane.

But it wasn't Fane, it was Henry. I rolled my eyes when I saw him.

"You again." I made a grunt of disgust. The trouble was I couldn't quite shut my mouth once I was done. "You are so annoying," I said, my words slightly slurred. "Go bother someone else."

"I only need you for a moment," Henry said.

"Not a good time. I don't feel good. Wouldn't want to ruin your fancy shoes." I gave Henry a toothy smile.

He looked down briefly and scowled. "You're not going to get sick. You'll just be out of it for a little while."

That's when I knew the son of a bitch had drugged me. I tried to grab him by the collar and scream in his face, but my hand slipped. My entire body nearly followed the downward direction of my arm, but Henry caught me.

"You and I are going to have a quick chat upstairs."

Where the hell were Diederick's peace keepers? I looked in the host's direction only to see everyone with their backs to us as the bastard bartender handed out shots from a tray.

I squirmed.

"Don't fight me, Aurora, unless you want to get Diederick involved."

"What did you tell him?" I demanded. The words were crystal clear inside my head. To Henry I imagined they sounded more like, "Wuh di you tell 'im?"

"I didn't tell him anything. This investigation is private. If you want off my watch list, it's simple. Just let my associate take a sample of your blood."

"This is harassment."

"All I want is the truth."

I stopped squirming, a silly grin coming over my face. "Me, too," I said. "That's all I want. Let me know when you find out, will you?" My head lulled back. The last thing I remembered was Henry gripping me tighter.

I didn't have to worry about standing upright any longer. When I came to, I was lying on a bed. I wasn't tucked in, cozy-like. Henry had laid me on my

back on top of the blankets. He stood on the side, arms folded, staring at me with the cold detachment of a mortician. The overhead light above him glared in my face. I squinted to block it out.

At least I wasn't tied down or duct taped, but my body still felt like jelly. I tried to lift my head, but I didn't move an inch. I turned my head to the side, instead. Nothing to see besides an oak dresser topped with a vase of fresh white lilies.

"Hurry up. You waited so long she's awake now," Henry said.

I turned my head to the other side. A scrawny teenage boy in slacks and a polo shirt jumped when he noticed me looking at him.

Of course Henry was too much of a pansy to test me himself.

"Is this one of the tasting rooms?" I asked.

My body might've been dysfunctional, but at least my words sounded better, a bit bewildered, but better than slurred.

"We're inside a guest room on the second floor," Henry said.

"You actually answered my question."

"I'm not a villain, Aurora. I'm just doing the job I was hired to do. Now why don't you answer mine?"

What a jackass. And to think I'd once had an oral fantasy about him. Well, he could just forget about an encore.

"Okay." I lifted my head and smiled at Henry sweetly. "I'm not a vampire hunter and I didn't kill Marcus."

"We'll see," Henry said. "My associate here is going to verify your statement."

"Associate?" I looked at the scrawny dude and snorted. "More like guinea pig."

Henry ignored me. "Go on," he said to his *associate*.

The boy didn't move or look at Henry. He kept looking at me, his body hunched, all but quivering.

"If she's lying and she really is a vampire hunter, her blood will kill me."

Henry sighed. "It won't kill you. The most you'll experience are some slight shakes and those quickly go away."

Ha! Who was the liar now?

"Hey, twigs," I said. "I will kick your ass if you get those chapped lips anywhere near my body."

The boy's eyebrows shot up. He looked at Henry. "If it's not that bad, why don't you bite her?"

Henry's menacing glare wasn't half bad. He looked the boy up and down.

"Are you refusing to cooperate?" he asked softly.

The boy swallowed before answering, "No, of course I'll cooperate." He said the words, but made no move toward me.

I'll admit I pitied the boy. Being forced to follow orders sucked. Didn't mean I wouldn't kick his ass if he bit me, though.

"I don't have all night," Henry said.

The boy took one step forward. He glanced at Henry and moved to the bedside.

All right, Aurora, how are you going to get out of this one?

I had a knife. No, wait. I'd left it inside the car.

I had my kung fu moves. Nope, those wouldn't do me much good, either, being drugged and all.

The boy crouched beside me, eyeing my arm warily.

"Permission denied," I said.

"Do it," Henry said louder. "Bite her."

A loud knock at the door made the boy jump.

"This room is occupied," Henry called out.

The knocking stopped.

Dante, I commanded inside my head, come through that door and kick these suckers' asses. But it wasn't Dante who burst through the door. It was Fane.

He sauntered inside, looking around the room, eyebrows rising when he saw me on the bed. He flashed Henry a chilling smile.

"Want to explain what the hell's going on in here?"

"Just asking Aurora some questions," Henry said, lifting his chin. If he wanted to make himself taller around Fane, it wasn't working. Fane still dwarfed Henry.

Fane glanced at the bed. "And you decided to make her more comfortable while you were at it?"

"She had too much to drink and wanted to lie down."

"Liar," I said.

Fane locked his eyes on Henry.

Henry lifted his chin higher. "You may have heard that I was hired by Richard Stanton to investigate Marcus' death."

Fane snorted. "And you think Aurora did it?"

Henry's eyes narrowed on Fane. "I have good reason to suspect her. No one at the party saw her leave that night. Her scarf was still hanging by the door when the last of the guests departed."

"That's it? A scarf." Fane nodded at the boy quivering by the bedside. "What's he doing here?"

"He's here to test Aurora's blood and make sure she's not a vampire hunter."

"I'll save you the trouble. I've tasted it many times to no ill-effect."

The boy heaved a sigh of relief. "So I don't have to bite her?"

Henry looked from Fane to me before answering, "You can go now. Shut the door on your way out."

No one spoke while the boy hurried out, shutting the three of us inside together. The room went silent. All I needed was an extra vampire and Dante to complete the scene from one of my most disturbing fantasies. For a

moment, I wondered if I was dreaming. I wished this were a dream. At least then I could wake up safe and put it all behind me.

Henry stared at Fane for a long time.

A lot of people would find this unnerving, but Fane inspected his fingernails as though royally bored.

"Have you really bitten her?" Henry asked.

"No, I'm only a pretend vampire." Fane made a sound of disgust deep in the back of his throat.

"Prove it."

Fane's body tensed. "I don't have to prove anything to you."

"Then I'll get someone else to do it."

Fane and Henry stared each other down. Suddenly, Fane's shoulders relaxed. He smiled sardonically. "Haven't had any action in a while, have you, Henry? Looking for a show?"

Fane turned to me so quickly his features blurred, turning him temporarily into a dark inky blot. His fingers curled around the hem of my dress. In one swift move, he lifted and pulled the skirt over my legs. The fabric slid up my body. It was so smooth and seductive that I didn't think to protest.

Fane gathered the skirt just below my hips.

It hit me. This couldn't be happening. I wouldn't let it.

I reached for Fane's hand, crying out, "Fane!"

"It's the only way to get him off your back," Fane whispered.

He pressed one knee into the mattress and swung his leg across me, straddling me above the knees. His hands slid up my thighs, pushing the dress over my hips. He sucked in a breath.

The air between my legs turned deliciously warm when he exhaled. God, it felt like his mouth was only an inch away. Maybe it was. I'd closed my eyes. It made the whole thing less humiliating. Not that I was coherent enough to experience anything other than a sense of weightlessness and disbelief.

My nipples tightened and rubbed against the fabric when I squirmed beneath Fane. Liquid heat rushed between my legs.

It's the drugs, I told myself. They were messing with my mind and making me crave things I shouldn't want.

Fane placed a firm hand on my belly. If he bit me, he'd convulse. I didn't think he'd go through with it. But a second later he dipped down, hot breath on my groin, and bit my inner thigh. Hard!

My eyes flew open. I screamed instantly. Henry covered his ears.

As Fane lifted his head, he pulled down my dress, covering my knees.

I forced my leaden head off the mattress to stare, bewildered, at Fane. He grinned at Henry, teeth covered in blood.

My jaw dropped.

Fane ran his tongue over his teeth and swallowed, smiling the entire time. "Can I have seconds?"

Henry folded his arms across his chest. “You proved your point, Francesco.”

Fane’s eyes narrowed on Henry. “Don’t ever question me again.”

Henry nodded curtly and walked out of the room, closing the door behind him.

I stared wide-eyed at Fane.

“You—you bit me,” I stuttered.

Fane’s eyebrows lifted.

I gathered my dress around my waist for a closer look. A set of teeth marks marred the skin of my inner thigh, but there was no blood.

My head snapped up. “But, how…”

Fane’s grin widened. “I bit my tongue.”

I sat up. “You bit your own tongue?”

“It was the only way to convince Henry you weren’t what he thought you were.”

I felt my heart floating with the knowledge that Fane had lied to one of his own and hurt himself to protect me.

“I had to find a place he wouldn’t examine closely,” Fane said. “I’d say it worked out to everyone’s satisfaction.” He smiled smugly.

I took a moment to stare at his lips, lips that had been between my legs moments ago. Fane’s eyebrow rose like the curly part of a question mark.

“I’m with Dante,” I lied. I looked down at the mattress, avoiding Fane’s eyes.

“In that case, he can send me flowers for keeping you alive.”

I nodded. “Thank you for that.” The movement of my head made everything fuzzy again. I stopped.

Fane scooted off the bed, stood, and reached out a hand for me. “Let’s get you out of here.”

I looked from his hand to his eyes. “I can’t leave. I’m working.”

Fane’s eyes narrowed. “You’re in no condition to do anything until you’ve slept off whatever Henry had the bartender slip into your drink. I’ll drive you home.”

“But Dante…”

Suddenly Fane grabbed me by the arm and pulled me up. Our noses nearly touched. I stared at Fane’s lips, watching their movement as he spoke.

“You said you want to live. If you meant it, you’ll come with me now.”

His tone brokered no argument. I lifted my eyes to his and nodded. When I tried to take a step forward, the floor seemed to move out from under me. Fane caught me.

“What did he give me?” I asked.

“Something to loosen you up.”

I felt loose all right.

“Put your arm around my neck,” Fane said as he maneuvered me out of the bedroom.

I did as he asked. Fane slipped an arm around my waist and we proceeded down the hall. Good thing we were on the main level and didn't have to deal with stairs.

Foster stood at attention near the entrance.

Fane halted our progress. "Did you have a jacket or a purse?" he asked me.

"Phone," I said.

Foster turned and pulled down one of the wicker baskets from the shelf. I didn't know how he remembered which was which. They all looked the same. Foster presented a basket with two phones inside.

"Which one's yours?" Fane asked.

I pointed to mine.

Fane grabbed it and stuffed it inside his pants pocket.

"Mind getting the door?" he asked Foster.

The butler returned the basket to the shelf before holding the door open. Cold air prickled my arms. The bald valet disappeared as soon as he saw Fane and returned promptly with the old beat up Pontiac Catalina. Bet they didn't see many guests driving shit cars like that on the hillside.

Fane stepped in front of the valet when he came around to open my door.

"I've got it," he said.

The valet crouched down. "Miss, I have to ask, do you know this man?"

I glanced at Fane. "He's an old friend. I'm not feeling well, so he offered to give me a ride home while my boyfriend finishes his tasting."

"Thank you. Very good."

Fane buckled me in.

Hello, old girl, I thought, looking around the interior of the car. It was so ancient, it was hard to tell it was clean, but Fane never had any crap lying around. This car was more like a memory-mobile. We'd made out in this car, skipped school, and worked on car rehabilitation, as Fane liked to call it. He'd come to my aid in this car. It wasn't exactly the batmobile, but it was reliable.

Once we'd pulled away from the lodge, I turned to Fane and said, "I'm guessing Henry wouldn't have had much luck getting me off the grounds."

"Marcus didn't like incidents," Fane said. "Diederick ensures there are none. If you think that makes you safe, think again. If Diederick has even a flicker of a suspicion about you, he'll ban you and your friends or worse."

I frowned. "I need to text Dante and Valerie."

Fane pulled my phone from his pocket and handed it to me. I texted Dante first—or tried to. My thumb kept sliding over the keys, pressing the wrong letters. I ended up using the delete key more than the letters.

Finally, I got everything spelled out properly.

Me: Ran into a problem. Got a ride home. Stop by tomorrow.

I hit "send" and opened up a new text to Valerie saying the same thing, minus

the invitation to come over.

I set the phone in my lap and looked over the mountain's edge as Fane drove down. Anchorage was lit up from below—a city in the distance, twinkling like earth-bound stars across the landscape. They began to blur. I rubbed my eyes.

"You can never go back there," Fane said.

I leaned my head into the seat. "I might not have a choice."

Fane hit the steering wheel with his fist.

"Tell me what needs to happen to free you from this life."

I nestled against the seat. Now that I was safe, the drug's calming effects washed over me.

"Agent Melcher needs to die," I said, my lids growing heavy. "But if he does, so do I. Without the antidote, I'll turn. I'll be trapped forever."

Silence filled the car. I stopped fighting the dark static in my mind and let the drug pull me under

I woke up slowly to the sound of voices. It was pitch black, so it took a moment to realize I was under the covers of my own bed. The voices outside my room gradually increased in volume as though my ears were adjusting.

"We need to tell her," Fane said.

"Isn't that what I said from the start?" Noel answered, sounding annoyed.

I listened for more, but their voices stopped. I felt so tired I didn't care. I shut my eyes and drifted back off.

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16
The Red Fury

Morning woke me with her insistent light. I hadn't dreamed. I'd like to think I had. I'd like to believe the incident at the lodge with Henry and Fane had all been a figment of my imagination.

I pulled the blankets back and found I was still fully dressed, minus the heels. I stretched my arm across the bed and grabbed my phone off the nightstand. It was nine forty-eight. Dante hadn't texted back. Valerie had.

Valerie: You better have a damn good reason for bailing.

As soon as my feet hit the floor, I headed over to Noel's room, not bothering to change.

Her door was open.

"Noel?" I whispered before entering.

Noel's bed was neatly made as though she'd never slept there. Okay, that was weird. I peeked inside the office just in case, but all was in order and unoccupied.

I descended the stairs, the hem of my long dress catching and dragging on the step behind me. From the hallway, I smelled coffee and toast. I walked into the kitchen and came face-to-face with Fane. He had his back to the counter, sipping a cup of coffee, facing me as though he'd been waiting all along.

"Good morning, Aurora," he said pleasantly.

I gaped at him. "What are you doing here, and where's Noel?"

Fane set his mug down and walked over to the coffee pot. "Cup of coffee?"

"I don't drink coffee."

"I'm not much of a chef, but I warmed some toast," he said.

"Thanks." I grabbed two plates out of the cupboard and held one out to Fane.

"I'm good with coffee," he said.

Fine. I put one plate back, dished up the toast, and set it on the counter.

"Did you spend the night here?"

"On the couch," Fane said, nodding towards the living room.

I tapped my foot against the linoleum floor. "And Noel?"

"She left for a party. Said she wouldn't be back until later this afternoon."

"Why did you stay?" I asked.

"I couldn't leave you here passed out alone, especially not when Giselle

Morrel is stalking you."

I huffed. "Does Noel inform you of everything?"

Fane shrugged.

"Do you know Giselle?" I asked. If Fane was going to get all nosy, he might as well make himself useful. I could use all the information I could get on her: strengths, weaknesses, and history. I also wanted to discuss anything other than what happened last night.

Fane took a sip of coffee before answering, "I met her briefly in Paris decades ago."

"What? Didn't hit it off?"

Fane studied my face a moment. "She was too cold for my taste."

Great. A vampire that was too cold for another vamp's taste.

"In other words, I'm screwed."

"Noel told me Giselle is the vampire you saved in Sitka."

"Yeah."

Fane stared at me. I couldn't read his expression. Suddenly, he broke out into a wide grin.

"Of all the vampires in the world, you chose to save Giselle?"

"Why's that so amusing?" I asked. "Is she the world's worst vampire or something?" Doubtful. That honor belonged to Jared.

Fane took another sip of coffee. "I didn't find her particularly alarming, but I didn't mess with her life companions. As I recall, Giselle was a loner except when it came to her adopted family. Now they're gone." He took another sip.

"Did you meet all of the Morrels?" I asked.

"There was a woman, Henriette, and a man, Andre, whom I saw again at one of Marcus' gatherings. There was a young man, too, if I recall."

I leaned forward. "What about Jared?"

Fane stared at me and shook his head.

"Or Xavier? His name was Xavier in France."

"Xavier Morrel," Fane said, slowly. "I heard about him. The police arrested him on murder charges—wouldn't be the first vampire arrested for his crimes. They hung the fellow." Fane lifted his chin. "Our necks are as fragile as a human's."

Oh, yes, I knew that well.

"Somehow he escaped," I said. "He goes by the name Jared now and works for the same boss I work for. He's the agency's recruiter." I balled my fingers into fists. "He hit my car."

Fane's eyes narrowed to slits. "It wasn't an accident?"

I shook my head. "It's worse. I think my boss gave him the orders. I think he's creating his own army of assassins to wipe vampires off the planet."

"As long as there's disease, there will be vampires," Fane said.

"I don't think he cares."

"So we're dealing with a madman?"

What did he mean by “we”? I pushed the plate of toast away.

“Not entirely mad, but there’s definitely something off about him.”

“Agent Melcher, you said?”

I nodded.

Fane set his mug on the counter with a clunk and walked over to me. My breath hitched when he stopped inches away and looked me in the eyes.

“Don’t you think it’s time we started working together?”

Work together. Not sleep together. That would be okay, wouldn’t it?

I moistened my lips. “I don’t know that it’s a good idea.”

Fane straightened. “As far as I’m concerned, it’s a bloody brilliant idea. You need all the help you can get. What’s the hesitation?”

I looked at the ground.

“Dante?” Fane suggested.

My head shot back up.

“Oh my god! He could be here any minute. I can’t believe he’s not here now.” I pushed past Fane, out of the kitchen and into the hallway, hoping he’d follow me. “He has to be wondering what happened to me last night.”

It was a small miracle he hadn’t shown up earlier and found Fane sleeping on the couch—just the two of us home alone together.

I looked into the kitchen where Fane hadn’t moved.

“What time is it?” I asked.

“A little after ten.”

“He must not have seen my text,” I said, shaking my head in bewilderment. Wouldn’t Dante have checked his phone to find out where to pick me up? That was the plan.

I shook my head again. “No, someone must have taken his phone.”

Even so, he would have borrowed someone’s and contacted me, or, at the very least, come over to see what happened. Maybe he had too much to drink and passed out.

“You need to go now,” I told Fane.

He folded his arms. “I’m not leaving you here alone.”

“Fane, you have to go.”

“The only way I’m leaving is if you agree to work together.”

“Fine. Maybe you can be a consultant or something,” I said without a second thought.

I needed him out of the house.

“Can I finish my coffee first?”

“No!”

I stormed down the hall, not checking whether Fane had followed me or not. He’d better be right behind me. As I neared the front door, there was a quick knock before the knob turned. I stopped in my tracks.

The door swung open, and with it, the vixen entered, fiery red waves tumbling past her shoulders. She’d obviously had a chance to go home and change. She now had on tight jeans and a skintight three-quarter-sleeve

sweater.

"Want to tell me about the "big" problem you ran into last night?" Valerie said as she closed the door.

Oh, god. Please tell me Fane hadn't followed me into the hallway and wasn't right now standing behind me. Please let him be in the kitchen, finishing his coffee, and now standing out of sight.

Valerie looked past me. She sucked in a horrified breath. Her nostrils flared and she sneered. I had my answer.

"What the hell is Fane doing here?" she demanded. She looked at him accusingly. "Did you spend the night?"

Her eyes flew back to me, looking over every inch of my dress.

"So it's true? Wait until Dante finds out about this. I'm sure he'll be thrilled to know you've been sneaking around with a vampire behind his back."

My heart slammed against my chest like a fist. I wasn't planning on telling Dante the vampire part. Spending the night with an ex rather than him was bad enough without turning the whole thing into a bloodbath.

Valerie shot Fane a malicious smile. "I bet Aurora didn't tell you that Dante hunts vampires. I wouldn't want to be in your shoes when Dante finds out. He enjoys killing vampires almost as much as he does fucking Aurora."

Without a second thought, I took three swift steps up to Valerie and slapped her across the face. My hand stung like a bitch afterwards, which meant Valerie's cheek had to throb. It matched the color of her hair, anyway.

She pressed her hand to her cheek. "You... bitch," Valerie said, fighting for breath.

For one brief blissful moment, Valerie looked too stunned to speak more than those two words.

I braced myself, fingers curling into fists, expecting her to lunge, but Valerie gave me a death glare instead and said two words worse than the previous ones.

"Big mistake."

She turned on her heel and headed for the door.

"Wait!" I called out, following after her. "Where are you going?"

"To talk to Melcher. He can decide what to do about your unauthorized fang banging. As for Fane, I recommend he leave town before Dante has a chance to catch up to him."

Panic seized me. I sprinted for the door and jumped in front of Valerie.

Her eyes flared. "Out of my way, Aurora."

"Tell Melcher whatever you want," I said. "I don't care if he punishes me. But you can't tell Dante about Fane. You know what he'll do."

"Fine," Valerie said, flipping her hair over her shoulder. "You both have to promise me that you won't see or speak to one another ever again."

"No," Fane said in a hard voice that carried across the hall.

His jaw, which had been moving side to side, stopped.

"No?" Valerie repeated, a look of challenge in her eyes.

I didn't know who was more intimidating at the moment: Valerie with her death glare, or Fane with his glacial stare and chilling voice.

"I survived two world wars. Outbreaks. Earthquakes, famine, and flood. I survived the plague." Fane grew taller with each disaster he named. "You are the least of my worries, Valerie Ward."

"You ought to worry, Fane. You forgot to mention volcanoes, and you have yet to experience the red fury. You have no idea what I'm capable of."

"I could say the same thing," Fane replied. "I have a lot of friends. One word from me, and you could disappear tomorrow."

A ghastly silence filled the hall. I was pretty sure Valerie felt as shocked as I did.

"Was that a threat?" she asked slowly. She looked at me. "Did he just threaten me?"

It took me a moment to find my voice. "You threatened him first," I said.

Valerie ignored me. Her eyes narrowed on Fane. "We'll see about that." Her voice turned sticky sweet. "It was nice knowing you, Fane." She yanked open the front door.

"Valerie, wait," I said.

"Let her go," Fane said.

After she slammed the door, I looked at Fane.

"I need to talk to Dante before she does."

"I'm not afraid of your big brother type."

"He's not my brother. He's my partner. I'm not with him the way Valerie implied, but I care about him."

"I still want to help you," Fane said.

Our eyes met, and in Fane's stare I felt my heart ooze with longing. I pushed the feeling aside.

"We can work together, but that's all. Right now I need you to leave so I can talk to Dante."

"I think I should be here when you speak to him."

"You're the last person who should be here when I talk to him!" I cried. "Please, Fane, let me handle this alone."

Fane straightened. "Last time you asked me to leave, you were drugged and nearly outed as a vampire hunter."

"You can't follow me everywhere," I said.

"Watch me."

I walked up to Fane until we were a breath away.

His eyebrows rose.

"There's something you should know," I said. "The government has me on a monthly antidote. If I don't take it I'll become like you. Undead. A vampire. I used to be afraid of immortality. I know it sounds crazy. Who wouldn't want to live forever?" I shook my head. "I think the thing I fear most is being alone the rest of my life."

"You're not alone," Fane said gently.

I believed him, but that scared me even more. Was this what my life would become? Being Fane Donado's life partner? What if he wasn't the one? What if it didn't work out? There wasn't exactly Match.com for vampires.

What about my mom and grandma? At what point did I disappear from their lives before they noticed I wasn't aging? How much time did I have left with them? Four years? Five? Ten?

Mom already knew about vampires. It wouldn't take too much convincing to tell her I'd turned.

I chewed on my lower lip.

Melcher had put a hit on Selene for telling her family what she was. Who would take Melcher's place if we managed to take him out? Would they leave my mom alone if she thought I was dead?

What would Dante think? He loved his work as an assassin. He lived for it. How could he ever understand why I wanted out?

They'd send someone after me for sure. I knew too much about the organization.

"We need to fake my death," I said.

Fane nodded. "I was thinking the same thing."

"No one can know," I said. "Only you and me. But first I need to talk to Dante alone."

I wasn't entirely sure what to tell Dante. I had to do damage control before Valerie had a chance to make up stories about me and Fane sleeping together the same way she'd told Fane I slept with Dante. I had to tell him Francesco was really Fane, the vampire. If I didn't, Valerie would. Somehow, I had to convince Dante not to hunt Fane down.

"And afterwards?" Fane leaned forward, lips practically touching my forehead.

"Afterwards we come up with a plan."

It was much easier to talk Fane into leaving once I'd agreed to end my life as I knew it. My heart raced in terror and anticipation. I hadn't seen a way out until now. I wouldn't have to kill anymore. I wouldn't have to take orders or stay in Alaska. I'd be free.

On the other hand, I might turn into a rabid vampire.

I tried to remember everything Melcher told me during orientation. He said I had been injected with a small amount of all the vampire diseases. Would that make me some kind of mutant vampire?

I was willing to take the risk.

First, I had to talk to Dante. It was clearer than ever that we weren't meant to be together. We wanted entirely different things out of life. Dante was content to work as an assassin. He once told me it was the best job ever.

And I was about to become the very creature Dante hunted.

My heart steadily dropped with each step I took upstairs. Soon, I might never see Dante again. He was more to me than a big brother. He was a friend I loved dearly. I didn't want to walk away forever. This was exactly why immortality sucked.

I grasped the handrail along the stairs, suddenly lightheaded.

How was I supposed to survive if I turned? Where would I live? I couldn't stay with family. Nor could I stay with Fane and Joss. I had too much pride for that.

How would I support myself?

I didn't have a degree or any skills besides vampire hunting.

Was that why Selene had been with that jerk at the party? I was beginning to understand her motives a little more. I didn't want to be a kept vampire. No way. Better a government slave with a stipend than Fane and Joss' charge, if Joss would even allow that. Fane would say it was to help me —he already said he wasn't leaving me alone again. I couldn't live like that. I just couldn't.

I needed to hang on a little longer. Get a degree. Choose a career. Save up until I found a way to be independent. I couldn't throw my life away on a whim.

More telling still was the relief that set in when I realized this. I'd get to spend more time with my family and Dante.

Fane would be disappointed, but that was too damn bad. This was my life. I had to consider the consequences.

I made it the rest of the way upstairs, heading to my bedroom to change. I checked my phone first, but there were no messages.

I wrinkled my nose. What the heck happened to Dante?

Where are you? I texted him.

I waited. After several minutes of standing in my room in a formal dress, staring at a silent phone screen, I did the old fashioned thing and called Dante. After multiple rings, it went to voicemail.

I ought to change, but all I could do was pace in front of my bed.

Something was wrong. If Dante had gotten held up for some reason, he would have called me, unless he couldn't. Had he been drugged, too? Or had too much to drink and passed out? Or gone home with one of the wine girls?

Not a chance.

My stomach growled. I hadn't eaten any of the toast Fane warmed up.

I should change and go to Dante's house. It was about a twenty minute walk away if I hustled. I pulled a pair of jeans out of the dresser, but before I could put them on, the front door opened and slammed shut.

I left it unlocked, expecting Dante at any minute, but I couldn't picture him slamming it like that.

Maybe Valerie had come back to kill me. With Dante MIA, I really wasn't in the mood.

I stormed out of my room to the landing on the stairs and looked down. Sure enough, Valerie had reappeared in the foyer, arms crossed, a menacing scowl on her lips.

"Now what?" I demanded.

"I only came back because Dante texted me and said to meet here and I want to see his face when I tell him you've been screwing a vampire behind his back."

Thank goodness. Dante was okay and on his way. An hour ago, Valerie's words would have caused me anxiety, but now I felt nothing but relief.

I made my way down the stairs. I really wanted to change, but first Valerie and I needed to get something straight.

"That's not what happened. If you shut up for one second, I'll tell you what went down at the party. I'll tell both of you."

Fane had walked in, bit me, bit his tongue, and saved the day. Like he said, Dante should be thanking him, not plotting his demise.

I glanced at my phone and frowned. "Why did Dante text you, but not me?"

"Do I look like I care?" Valerie snapped.

I folded my arms. Valerie folded hers.

"Want to know what happened?" I asked.

"Not really."

Too bad.

"While you and Dante were off getting private tours and sucking blood, Henry drugged me. He was going to have a vampire bite me to see whether or not I was a vampire hunter. Thank goodness Fane was at the party and stepped in, or I wouldn't be standing here now."

Valerie's arms remained crossed.

"Then why did he spend the night?"

"Because I passed out, and he was worried about me," I said.

Valerie's eyes flashed. If anything, she looked angrier than before.

"You and Fane are finished. If Dante doesn't take care of him, I will."

That's it. I'd had about enough of Valerie's idle threats. That's all they were. She liked to talk the talk, but that was as far as it went. Dante was right. Deep down, she must be very insecure. Well, I wasn't.

"Over my dead body," I said, lifting on the balls of my feet.

"Oh, really? I find that very interesting. I'm sure Dante will, too."

I glared at Valerie. She glared back. We stood, arms crossed, waiting in the foyer in silence for Dante.

Three minutes later, we heard a car pull up on the street.

"You're in deep shit, Aurora," Valerie said.

I waited for Dante to get to the door and knock. I wasn't exactly eager to throw it open and have him hug me in front of Valerie.

The knock was light, more of a tap.

Valerie glared at me. "Go ahead and open it."

I inhaled and opened the door. Daylight seeped in around a petite figure with long blond hair. She held a gun pointed at my face.

There'd been many occasions for my life to flash before my eyes, but I was usually too busy cussing, struggling, and resisting imminent death to give my sorry existence much thought. None of those things compared to the cold fear that gripped my heart as I stared down the barrel of a revolver.

Everything I still hoped to achieve in life took off like paper airplanes with nowhere to go, but down, crashing nose first to the floor after a brief flight in time.

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17
Hostages

I expected the gun to fire at any moment. When it didn't, I took a step back.

"What is it?" Valerie demanded. I didn't see her face, but she must have seen mine.

The blonde we'd rescued in Sitka stepped inside slowly. Giselle. She wore an off-white button-up blouse, airy and slightly ruffled. Her lips were stained burgundy, the deepest red, set off by creamy white skin. Her golden locks fell in thick wavy strands that stopped just below her breasts.

She glanced at Valerie, but kept her gun pointed at me. Her expression was neutral, grayish-blue eyes sharp and attentive.

"Stand next to your friend," she commanded.

I expected her to sound more French, but she spoke with only the barest hint of an accent. Maybe like Fane she'd adapted to the English language over time.

I backed up beside Valerie wordlessly.

"Take her purse and set it on the bottom stair."

Valerie scowled. "I don't think so."

Giselle pulled back the safety on the gun. It clicked into place.

"Just give me your purse," I said.

When Valerie made no movement, I took it off her shoulder and set it on the step. Valerie glared, but didn't stop me.

"And your phone," Giselle said to me. "Put that on the stair as well."

I did as she asked, wordlessly.

Giselle reached back for the front door handle, closing us inside together.

"Is there somewhere more comfortable we can sit and have a conversation?" she asked.

"Conversation." That sounded a heck of a lot better than "prepare to die."

I nodded. "There's a living room down the hall."

"You first," Giselle said. "And you," she added, pointing her gun at Valerie.

"Only if you lower that god-damn gun," Valerie said.

She didn't lower it. "I will shoot you," she said.

"Let's find out what she wants," I said under my breath to Valerie.

"Fine," Valerie said. "But only because I'm curious. I guess I can wait five minutes before I take this scrawny bitch down."

I braced myself for a gun-shot, but Giselle merely stared back with bottomless blue eyes that lacked any kind of emotion. My biggest concern was that Dante would show up and get us all killed with his heroics.

Or maybe he's already dead, a voice said from the depths of my skull.

There's no way he would have left the party last night without finding out what had become of me. He hadn't called, texted—nothing. Valerie said he'd texted her, but he would have contacted me first. Something was very wrong.

I needed to get Giselle's gun and find out what was going on.

I led the way back to the living room, glancing quickly into the kitchen for a knife laying on the counter. No such luck. There'd be plenty of time for Giselle to shoot me in the back if I were to rush in and go for the knife drawer.

I continued to the living room empty-handed. I took a seat on the couch, hoping that if I looked relaxed, Giselle would relax too. Valerie narrowed her eyes at me as she walked in and plopped into an armchair. She folded her arms across her chest, lower lip jutted out as she looked at Giselle.

Giselle took a stance roughly eight feet in front of us, finger still on the trigger. She'd chosen me as her primary target, meaning I'd be the first one down if Valerie suddenly lunged for her.

"We didn't get a chance to meet properly in Sitka. I am Giselle Morrel, and you are Aurora Sky and Valerie Ward. You broke into my house, and now my entire family is dead."

"You are aware that you'd be dead, too, if it weren't for us," Valerie said.

I might have been mistaken, but I could have sworn I heard something that sounded close to unease in Valerie's voice. That made me more nervous than I already felt.

Giselle leveled her gaze at me. "Where is Xavier?"

"We don't know any Xavier," Valerie said with a huff.

"Jared," I said.

"Yes, Jared," Giselle confirmed. "Where is he?"

Valerie's shoulders leaned forward. "Listen, G. If we knew where Jared was, he'd be dead."

"You want him dead?" Giselle asked.

Valerie huffed. "Isn't that what I just said?"

Giselle lowered the gun an inch.

"Why?"

Valerie straightened her shoulders. "Because he's the world's biggest asshole."

"He tried to kill us in Sitka," I said. If it was possible to get on Giselle's good side, that ought to help. We had a common enemy. She shouldn't be pointing her gun at us.

I looked down the hall as far as I could see, still wondering if Dante might be okay after all and suddenly show up.

Valerie leaned forward in the chair. "The reason he came after us is because we hid your brother and refused to kill you, you ungrateful blood-sucking-bitch."

Leave it to Valerie to keep the conversation running smoothly.

I hurried to speak before Giselle had time to react.

"What Valerie means to say is that it was too late for your parents. While Jared was confronting them downstairs, we planned to sneak off with you and your brother and get you both to safety, but Jared finished and came after us. We barely made it out with you."

"How long have you been working with Jared?" Giselle asked.

"That was the first time," I said.

"He hired you?"

"We work for the same boss. He ordered us to go to Sitka. We were only supposed to look for clues."

Valerie stood up suddenly. "God, Aurora. Why don't you tell her everything?"

I glared back, momentarily forgetting Giselle.

"Do you think Melcher or Jared are worth dying for?" I asked. "Because I don't."

"I don't give a shit about either of those scumbags, but I don't have to answer to her." Valerie pointed her chin at Giselle.

"Sit down," the vampire said.

Valerie put a hand on her hip. "Or what? You'll shoot me?"

I balled my fingers into fists against my thighs. Things could get ugly real fast. I was on tenterhooks as it was wondering what had become of Dante. If he really had been on his way, why wasn't he here? Why had Giselle shown up, instead? Had Valerie gotten mixed up when she read the text? Maybe Giselle had told her to meet here. Valerie wasn't exactly clear-headed that morning.

Giselle lifted her chin and regarded Valerie with cold calculation. Her lips were pressed together, eyes narrowed to slits. She wasn't glaring, merely regarding her hostage the way an eagle watches a sitting duck. Her cool calm gave me goose bumps.

"I have no desire to shoot you," Giselle said finally. "I would rather cut out your tongue and shove it down your throat right before I drive my blade through your beating heart."

Valerie's lips curled back. "You're dead, bitch."

"I've been dead a long time," Giselle answered calmly. "And I've killed a lot of people." She pushed the gun's safety back up with her thumb and holstered the gun at her hip, beneath her blouse. On her opposite hip, she pulled out a dagger.

Giselle took a step forward, lifting the dagger. "I'll save my bullets for your friend. For you, I'll use the blade."

"Wait!" I cried.

Giselle and Valerie looked at me.

"Before the two of you start shedding blood, can you tell us what you want?"

Giselle pressed her lips together.

I looked at Valerie. “Can you please sit down a couple minutes longer?”

Valerie made a show of mulling it over. She blew a strand of hair out of her face and lowered her butt to the chair slowly. “Fine, but you better get as much information out of her as you can before I silence her for good.”

“I’ll ask the questions,” Giselle said. “What kind of clues were you looking for at my house?”

“Your father… stepfather? Andre was a murder suspect,” I said. “Two people were killed last February at or near a party hosted by a vampire named Marcus.”

“I know who Marcus is,” Giselle said.

And she knew Fane, too. Sorta. I wondered if it would help to bring that up. From their one meeting, it didn’t sound like they were close. It didn’t sound like Giselle was close with anyone other than her dead family, and she clearly blamed Valerie and me for their deaths.

“Andre was at that party,” I continued. “We were sent to Sitka to search for clues. Jared snuck into your house earlier and claimed to find a cross worn by one of the victims.”

Giselle gave me the same cold stare she leveled at Valerie moments before.

“Andre was many things,” she said slowly. “But he was not a murderer.”

I nodded. “I think Jared killed the woman, Agent Crist, then planted evidence as an excuse to kill you and your family. I overheard him confronting Andre. He said you all left him for dead in Paris.”

Giselle made no answer. Since she said she was the one asking the questions, I waited for her next one.

“The five of us were grave robbers in Paris,” Giselle said.

Melcher had mentioned this about the Morrel’s, but I didn’t expect Giselle to admit it so openly, unless she planned to kill us afterwards. Or maybe she’d been around for so long nothing scared her—not even Jared or Evil Red glowering from the chair beside me.

“We dug up fresh corpses and sold them to medical laboratories for dissection,” Giselle continued. “We checked the cemeteries as often as we could without arousing suspicion. It wasn’t easy work, but it paid the bills. Then Xavier got greedy.”

My eyes drifted down the hall while Giselle spoke. I didn’t realize they’d gone that direction until Giselle followed my gaze. I quickly snapped my attention back to the living room.

Giselle met my eyes.

“Jared,” she said. “I shall call him by his new name. One day, Jared came up with an idea to make more money. He said why wait for people to die when we could kill them ourselves. Not only would we have fresh bodies, but there’d be no sneaking around cemeteries at night, shoveling through six feet of soil.”

My lips pulled back. My empty stomach turned.

"Henriette didn't like it, either," Giselle said. "No one did besides Jared. Eventually he got caught, tried, and convicted. Everyone thought he was dead, hung in the gallows, but I had to see it with my own eyes. Before his sentence could be carried out, there was an outbreak in La Force prison. Hundreds of inmates perished, but not Jared. He showed no symptoms—was, in fact, in perfect health, and that made the mystery man curious."

"Mystery man?" I asked, leaning forward.

"When I came to La Force after the outbreak, one of the guards told me that Jared was gone, that a man of great power had visited him and ordered his release. I rode home and told my family that Jared was dead. I thought it was better if they believed he was dead rather than spend their lives looking over their shoulders. I knew what my family wanted: a fresh start. There was already too much controversy associated with our name around Paris. When Jared was tried for murder, even the newspapers in London printed stories about him. So I convinced my family to move to America. We intended to make our fortune and return to France when enough decades had passed, but the new world became our home. We made a good life for ourselves. We were happy until Jared reappeared."

The more I stared at Giselle, the more I was convinced that this was a girl who had never been happy a day in her life.

"Last February, I woke up in my brother's car in the parking lot of the Westmark Hotel. When I returned home, there were police cars surrounding my house. They'd already removed Henriette, Andre, and Etienne—I saw them at the morgue. The police said they found one man unconscious at the house and took him into custody, only to be ordered to release him after a call came from above—just like La Force."

"How did you find us?" I asked. She didn't sound like she'd had any communication with Jared—in which case, how did she figure out that Valerie and I were at her house?

"I returned to the hotel and questioned the night deskman who described a young redhead and a raven-haired woman who returned the night of my family's murder and asked for a cab. I next spoke to the cab driver and the airport ticket agents and tracked you to Anchorage. But the red-haired woman had taken a different plane in Juneau, and the black-haired one left Anchorage soon after arriving. So I waited patiently, and now here we all are."

"What about my mom and grandma?" I demanded. "Why did you take over their French class?"

Thank God they were in Florida. I'd never felt more relieved about hustling them out of the state. I didn't even want to imagine what it would be like if we were having this conversation at Gran's condo. Giselle could have decided at any moment to retaliate.

"I thought I might need them, but I didn't," Giselle said.

One of the many things making me nervous about Giselle was the way

her expression never changed.

"Need them for what?" I asked carefully.

"As hostages in exchange for Jared and your boss, the mystery man."

My mouth gaped open. She'd planned to kidnap my mom and grandma. The thought of it struck terror in my heart. While I'd been away at camp, their necks had been within snapping distance of the Mad Madame.

"I've had about enough of this," Valerie said. "Melcher is not this so-called mystery man. He's a hundred and ten percent mortal, and there's nothing mysterious about him."

Valerie had a point. Melcher would have to be a vampire in order to have saved Jared from the Paris prison. Not in a million years! (Which was a stretch even for vampires.) Melcher wanted to eradicate the vampire race. He hated vampires. He couldn't be one of the damned (as he called them).

"You will deliver Jared and your boss to me. This is non-negotiable," Giselle said.

Sure thing. As if we could ever pull that off. Jared, maybe, but Melcher was untouchable on base. I took another look past Giselle into the empty hallway.

Her eyes bore into mine.

"Dante's not coming," she said.

My heart nearly slowed to a stop. I lost my breath. How did she know his name? She couldn't unless she'd done something to him. No. She was bluffing.

Giselle doesn't bluff, a firm voice scolded from deep inside my skull.

How do you know? Dante's probably fine. He got hungry. He always gets hungry. He stopped for food. That's why he's late. Or he's hung over. That bastard bartender drugged him, too, and he passed out in a guest room at The Lodge. He's still sleeping it off. He hasn't been conscious long enough to call you.

Delude yourself all you want. Dante's been kidnapped or worse, he's dead.

Stop it!

My entire body felt like it was shutting down.

Get a grip, Aurora. I took a deep breath and balled my hands into fists, nails biting into my palms.

"Where is he?" I demanded.

"He's not dead, but he will be if you don't deliver your boss and Jared to me. That goes for Gavin, as well," Giselle said, glancing at Valerie. "I have both your boyfriends, and I will kill them if you don't do what I want."

"To hell with this," Valerie said, suddenly leaping from her chair. "You don't get to tell me what to do."

Maybe Valerie truly cared about Gavin, or maybe she was still pissed off about finding Fane at my house. Or it could be that she was sick of being told what to do. For whatever reason, she jumped off her chair and went at Giselle

like a banshee out of hell, ginger locks flying behind her in a flash of rage.

Giselle instinctively crouched into combat position. Her expression never changed, as though she'd patiently waited and expected an attack all along. From there, everything happened quickly. Valerie flew at Giselle. Giselle jabbed the knife forward. A second later, a blood-curdling scream filled the house. It was hard to tell who'd made the ghastly noise, but it sounded unfortunately familiar. My worst fear was confirmed when Valerie fell to the ground clutching her lower abdomen, screaming.

Blood soaked through her shirt, spreading across the fabric at an alarming rate.

I jumped up to help her, but a soft "click" made me pause. I slowly turned my head. Giselle had swapped the knife for the gun, taking the safety back off. She aimed at my head.

"Don't move another inch."

I froze.

Before Giselle could say anything more, Valerie began screaming.

"She stabbed me! The bitch stabbed me!"

Giselle had also threatened to cut out Valerie's tongue. Maybe she ought to tone it down before the vampire made good on her threat. At least she hadn't struck her in the heart. Still, it was sickening to see how quickly blood was spreading across Valerie's shirt at the abdomen, staining the edges of her fingers where she clutched the wound.

The screaming suddenly stopped.

Valerie's face turned white. She looked directly at me.

"I don't want to die," she said in a pitiful voice.

I opened my mouth, but no words came out. I turned my focus to Giselle, instead. There wasn't a trace of humanity in the cool gaze she leveled at me. Her lips remained firmly pressed together. She hadn't gotten a drop of blood on her white blouse or blond hair.

"Do you want me to kill Jared and Melcher?" I demanded.

She said she wanted them handed over, but she didn't specify whether she wanted them delivered dead or alive.

"You will bring them to me alive," Giselle said.

"And how am I supposed to do that?"

Giselle trained her cold gaze on me. "I don't care how. Once you've captured them, contact me. I will text you the number."

As if I'd be texting her anytime soon, not with mission impossible hanging over my head. Jared might not even be in the state. And Melcher… mission quadruple impossible.

"The darkness," Valerie gasped suddenly. "It's coming for me."

I glanced her way, thinking that if she felt well enough to be dramatic, her injury must not be as bad as it looked. Valerie's lashes fluttered. Her lids closed.

"Valerie?"

There was no answer.

"Valerie!" I yelled.

When she made no movement, I shook my arm at Giselle. "I need to call her an ambulance. Now!"

"Will you deliver Jared and Melcher to me?"

"Yes."

"Very well," Giselle said, clicking the safety on her gun and holstering it beneath her blouse. "Take all the time you need. I'm not going anywhere."

I thought I caught the barest hint of a smile on Giselle's lips. More of a twitch. As though she was being generous or making an attempt at humor. Vampires all seemed to think time was a big joke.

I didn't have time. Valerie was bleeding out, and Dante would need his next shot of the antidote in less than a month. Thank God he'd just gotten juiced up three days ago. Obviously Giselle hadn't bitten him, or she wouldn't be standing in front of me now.

"I want to speak to Dante," I said.

For all I knew, Giselle had lied, and Dante was already dead. My stomach tightened. Valerie needed immediate medical attention, but I had to know Dante was all right before Giselle walked out.

She stared at me for a moment before saying, "That can be arranged."

With that, she turned and walked out. I considered tackling her from behind, but what would that do? Valerie might die in the meantime, and Dante would be as good as dead if I took down the one vampire who knew where he was. So I let Giselle go and ran for my phone. It was still on the bottom stair beside Valerie's purse.

I opened my emergency contact list. In addition to the cleaners, we were given a number to call an ambulance if any of us were ever critically wounded in battle.

I dialed the number, got out the words "stab wound," and gave the operator my home address. Once the call was made, I ran back down the hall, dropping my phone on the kitchen counter as I grabbed the towel hanging in front of the oven. I ran to the living room and fell to my knees beside Valerie.

The front of her shirt was stained red. I moved Valerie's limp hand from her abdomen and pressed the kitchen towel against the wound, applying firm pressure with both hands.

"Valerie?" I whispered.

Her lashes didn't even flutter.

"Help is on the way."

I felt her chest rise and fall ever so slightly under my hands. Blood soaked through the towel. I closed my eyes and concentrated on my own breathing, imagining I could transfer my breath to Valerie and buy her more time.

The ambulance seemed to take forever. Finally, I heard a siren wailing in the distance, coming closer until it was right outside the house. The sound

abruptly cut off. The paramedics didn't bother knocking. Three of them rushed in with a stretcher and first aid kit.

"I'll take it from here," a woman said, crouching with the kit beside me.

She had the lid flipped open instantly, pulling out gauze and bandages. Two young men set a stretcher on the floor beside her. All three wore matching navy pants and light blue linen tops.

The woman bent over Valerie and moved the saturated towel to her chest, uncovering the wound. Blood pooled on top of Valerie's shirt. At the sight of the blood, my heart sped up. Saliva gathered in my mouth. I looked away, but it had nothing to do with nausea.

"We need to get her on base right away, she's already lost too much blood," the woman said to her comrades.

One man went to Valerie's head, the other her feet.

"On three. One. Two. Three."

Once they had Valerie on the stretcher, the men lifted her in unison.

The nice thing about agency paramedics was they didn't ask a lot of questions. They didn't even say goodbye on their way out.

The female led the way, opening the front door for the men and shutting it behind them, which was a good thing since my hands were covered in blood.

I walked in a daze to the kitchen sink. I felt lightheaded, weak, and so terribly hungry. When I looked at the blood on my hands, it promised rejuvenation if only I'd take a lick.

Valerie's blood, I reminded myself, and turned the faucet on.

I watched a steady stream of red run down the sink. What a waste.

I was too exhausted to worry about my craving—one of the worst in memory. I chalked it up to stress.

My phone vibrated and rang on the counter four feet away.

Dante, I thought, hope rising in my chest. All I wanted was to hear his voice and know he was okay. I quickly dried off my hands and answered, but it was Melcher.

"Aurora, it's Agent Melcher," he said calmly. "Tell me what's going on."

I pressed the phone against my ear, unable to speak. What was I supposed to say? I couldn't tell Melcher that Giselle wanted him in exchange for Dante. It would make sense to mention Jared. He killed her family. She'd want to get to him for obvious reasons, but Melcher would alert Jared. How could I expect to get anywhere near him after that?

Why did Giselle have to go and stab Valerie? And why did Evil Red have to go and attack the Mad Madame?

I hadn't had time to think anything through.

"Aurora?" Melcher pressed.

I let out the breath I'd been holding. "Yeah, I'm here. Giselle found me."

"Are you hurt?"

"No, but she stabbed Valerie."

"Where is Giselle now?"

"I don't know."

"I've sent a car to pick you up. It will be there in fifteen minutes."

Let me guess? A black sedan?

I gripped my phone tight. I didn't want to be whisked away to the base. I wanted to find Dante. I wanted to make sure Valerie was okay. I wanted to take both Giselle and Jared down, to say nothing of the Mystery Man, if that's who Melcher was—the one pulling all the strings.

"We'll talk soon," Melcher said before ending the call.

I lowered the phone from my ear, took long strides down the hall, and gathered my dress in my hands as I ran up the stairs. There was no time to waste.

I gave the bathroom only a passing glance. No time for a shower.

Before I reached my room, I had the dress pulled over my head and my underwear around my ankles. I stepped out of my undergarments, took four steps to the dresser, and grabbed the first fresh pair of underwear my hand came into contact with. Once in place, I pulled on a pair of blue jeans and white tank top.

I did a quick check at the bathroom mirror. My makeup from that night still looked good except for several dots of mascara below my eyes. Ack, and Fane had seen me this way earlier that morning. I scowled into the mirror for thinking of that at such a moment.

After removing the mascara marks with a wet tissue, I gave my long black hair a quick brush through.

With my remaining five minutes, I called Fane.

"How did it go?" he asked.

The words tumbled out of me all at once.

"Giselle found me. She kidnapped Dante and stabbed Valerie. She wants me to bring her Jared and Melcher, which is complete madness. But if I don't do it, she'll kill Dante. She didn't say that, but what else would she do with him?"

"Wait a minute, slow down," Fane said.

"I don't have time to slow down! Melcher is sending a car for me. It will be here any minute."

"When did you see Giselle?" Fane asked.

"After you left, she showed up. Valerie came back first. She said Dante had texted her to meet at my place, but it must have been Giselle. She held us at gunpoint and said she had Dante and Gavin."

I didn't know how close Fane was to Gavin, but they had teamed up to ditch a couple of dead vampires at the dump on my behalf once upon a time. Then again, according to Noel, the last time the vamps were in contact, Gavin had taunted Fane about taking up where he left off with Valerie. The more I thought about it, the more I realized Fane was unlikely to give two shits about what became of Dante or Gavin.

A surge of anger twisted in my gut.

"I don't know why I'm telling you this. It's not your problem," I suddenly snapped.

"Hey," Fane replied. "I meant what I said earlier. I'm here to help you."

Yeah, me. Not Dante. What would motivate him to do that?

He inhaled. "I should have stayed."

"You can't guard me around the clock."

"Can't I?"

Fane's words hung in the air.

I breathed into the phone wordlessly until I heard a car pull in the driveway.

"I have to go," I said. "They've come for me."

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18
Partners

Agent Melcher wasn't inside his office when his secretary told me to go in and wait.

I sat on the edge of a chair. Melcher's office didn't exactly put me at ease.

The room had always been too bland for my taste. There were no windows and no décor besides a simple wooden cross nailed to the wall. The metal file cabinets behind Melcher's desk looked as if they'd been around as long as the base had been in operation.

There were no papers on Agent Crist's old desk—only a stapler, pen cup, calculator, and an old Dell computer. I wondered when Melcher would replace Crist. More than that, I wondered what had happened to her.

Jared had killed her, I was sure. I didn't even need to know why. The man was clearly capable of killing anyone for any reason.

What I wanted to know is what had provoked the situation.

Now that Crist was dead, I couldn't help painting a heroic picture of her. It was more of a fantasy than a theory, one in which Crist became suspicious of the agency's recruiting methods and, after meeting Jared, their top recruiter, began digging around. Her sharp words and bitter scowl had all been a cover as she worked tirelessly to get to the truth. And when she found it, Jared silenced her for good.

Poor Agent Crist, I couldn't imagine Jared went easy on her.

Melcher finally arrived, wearing black slacks with a tucked in dress shirt. He closed the door, shutting me in with him.

I had never been alone with Melcher. The first time we met inside the hospital room, Crist was with him. After that, there were always other teammates gathered inside his office: Dante, Valerie, and Noel. Now that it was just me sitting in a chair across from him, I realized how much I missed everyone. Their absence became a tight ache inside my chest.

If only Dante was standing against the wall in a slight slouch, knee bent, with a lop-sided grin on his lips.

If only Noel sat beside me, head bent sullenly, half-hidden by her hoodie.

I even missed the scowl on Valerie's lips when Melcher announced our assignments. There was little sense in feeling sentimental now that she had reverted back to blackmailing and vicious threats. A tiger really couldn't change her stripes.

Everything had changed. Dante had gone from a questionable mentor to a spirited partner to someone I kissed. Fane had complicated things by waltzing back into my life and claiming he should have never pulled back. It

was a lot harder to push him away after he stepped in and helped me out of a hairy situation with Henry. What would Henry have done if he found out I really was a vampire hunter? I'd been drugged. He could have easily disposed of me. I hadn't had time to think about it with each surmountable crisis crashing down.

I couldn't get Dante back on my own, and the man in front of me certainly wasn't going to help. Melcher probably had a rule against negotiating with vampires.

He took a seat and stared at me across the desk. "Tell me everything that happened."

Everything? Fat chance.

If Melcher refused to be candid with me, he could forget about getting the full story.

I had a greater appreciation for Noel's deliberate omissions and Valerie's attempts to manipulate the man.

I took a deep breath. "Earlier this morning, Giselle Morrel showed up at my house. As soon as I opened the door, she had a gun pointed at me. She forced Valerie and me into the living room."

"What was Miss Ward doing there?" Melcher asked.

My chair groaned when I shifted my weight to the right.

"She received a text from Dante telling her to meet at my place."

Melcher leaned forward. "And where is Dante?"

"Giselle has him." My throat constricted.

Melcher frowned. "How did she manage that?"

"I don't know." And I didn't like the way Melcher asked so disapprovingly, like Dante had somehow messed up—like we all had. The only reason any of us were in this mess was because of him.

"When's the last time you saw Dante?"

"Last night, at Diederick's tasting. He escorted me downstairs before heading to the third floor to do his undercover work."

"What happened with your mission?" Melcher asked next. "The cleaners never received a call."

Was Melcher for real? Dante had been kidnapped and Valerie stabbed, but he wanted to know why I hadn't completed a stupid assignment?

I liked Selene. I never wanted to kill her, and I wasn't sorry I hadn't gotten the chance.

I straightened my back. "I never saw Selene."

"Why did you leave before Dante?"

I tried glaring at Melcher, but I could never pull it off as naturally as Valerie.

"Henry was harassing me about Marcus' death. He's been hired to investigate, and he thinks I had something to do with it."

Melcher's frown deepened. "He approached you at the party about this?"

I nodded.

Melcher sat back in his chair, hands clasped together, looking off towards the wall.

"I'll have another agent take care of him." His head bobbed as if he was checking off a problem with his chin.

"Anyway, it was a little hard to maintain cover when a vampire was standing around accusing me of being a vampire hunter in the middle of a vampire party. So I left."

"He put you in a rough spot," Melcher conceded.

My handler had no idea. Henry had put me in a rough spot, all right. One that ended with Fane's face between my legs.

I shifted to the left side of the chair. I needed to think about something else.

"How is Valerie?" I asked.

"She's still unconscious, but she'll make it through. Now, let's get back to Miss Morrel. What did she want?"

"Jared." My lips pulled back as I said his name.

"I figured as much," Melcher said. "What exactly did she propose?"

"That I deliver Jared in exchange for Dante." I didn't mention Gavin. I figured Melcher wouldn't care about the vampire, and neither did I. Gavin was on his own. Maybe he would even convince Giselle to release him when she realized he was one of her own. If she grabbed Dante at the party, she might believe he, too, was a vampire since that's what he was posing as.

Melcher twisted his lips from side to side. "We can make this work to our advantage."

I sat up. "How?"

As long as I got Dante back alive, I didn't care whose advantage the situation worked towards.

Melcher lips curved up on one side. "We'll give her Jared. We couldn't ask for a better opportunity. Once we have her location, Jared can send Miss Morrel's soul into the great beyond where it rightfully belongs." Melcher rubbed his hands together. "I'll call off all the informants I put on her. I've already wasted too many resources on Giselle." Melcher reached for the receiver on his desk phone, lifting it in one quick motion to his ear. "Hello, Mandy. Send in Agents Parker and Hicks."

I turned around in my seat as the door opened and two young men entered Melcher's office. One of the guys had shaggy light brown hair that stopped just above his shoulders. He wore faded blue jeans with a hole in one knee and a slate blue shirt. It hung loose over his pants. He looked a lot like Kurt Cobain with slightly darker hair. Maybe the singer hadn't really died. Maybe the government had made it look like a suicide and recruited him.

The second guy was black with dark hair buzzed nearly to his skull. He wore a long-sleeved gray thermal top, taut against his large muscular chest, and had full lips that immediately caught my eye.

I had a slight thing for lips.

I scrambled out of my chair as Cobain's twin stretched his hand forward.

"I'm Levi."

"Aurora," I said, shaking his hand.

"Mason," the black guy said, taking my hand after Levi released it.

"Mr. Parker is an informant," Melcher said, indicating Levi, the shaggy haired Kurt Cobain-look-alike. "And Mr. Hicks is a hunter." The reason for their arrival didn't sink in until Melcher said, "The three of you will be working together."

The ground shifted under my feet. I looked from Parker to Hicks, Levi to Mason. They were way too hot to work with, for one thing. More importantly, they weren't Dante, Noel, or Valerie.

"Mr. Parker and Mr. Hicks have plenty of experience," Melcher said.

Like that really put me at ease. And what did Melcher mean by "working together?" Were they going to help me bring back Dante?

I turned slowly towards Melcher. "What exactly is the plan?" I asked.

He leaned forward on his elbows. "We're going to shut down Diederick's tastings, permanently."

For several seconds I was speechless. Here I thought we were planning Dante's rescue, but Melcher had brought up Diederick. I couldn't care less about tastings or any other uppity vampire function tailored to the rich and thirsty.

My mouth must have hung open.

"You look confused," Levi said, flashing me a megawatt smile. Despite the sexy cleft in his chin, his comment annoyed the hell out of me.

I folded my arms across my chest. "My partner's been kidnapped, so maybe you'll forgive my confusion as to why his recovery isn't top priority."

Bonehead. I saw right through his bright smile.

"Apprehending Giselle and recouping Dante are top priorities," Melcher said. "Once I get Jared back in town, we will formulate a plan. In the meantime, your assignment stays the same. I want you on tastings. I want the three of you to put down every vampire who goes upstairs."

Levi and Mason looked at each other and smiled. So the studs enjoyed the hunt? Charming.

"And how do you propose we do that?" I demanded.

Rather than answer me, Melcher looked at Mason with raised brows. Mason's lips puckered in thought. They were impossibly full.

"We find a way upstairs and replace one of the wine girls with her." Mason glanced sideways at me. "One by one, the vampires feed on her, convulse, and one by one, we kill them."

Levi placed a finger in his cleft. "I hear you, brother, but where do we put the bodies?"

"Bathroom, closet, out the window—I don't care."

No, of course not. He wasn't the one getting the blood sucked out of him. Bodies meant biting. As much as I didn't enjoy killing, it didn't seem fair to

be the only one doing all the poisoning in one night.

"What about you?" I asked Mason. "You're a hunter. Why don't you step in?"

"Sure, let's have the vampires bite the black man." Mason folded his arms across his chest and narrowed his eyes.

Wait a minute? Was he trying to turn this into something racial? Because it wasn't. This was totally and completely sexist. Sure, let's have the vampires suck on the white chick.

I glared back.

Levi deliberately coughed. "They're called wine girls," he said slowly, as though I were daft. "Girls, as in female, as in you."

"Yeah, I get it," I said sourly.

"Do you?" Levi asked. "Because it didn't seem like it a second ago."

He was an asshat, all right. They both were.

I looked at Melcher. "Do I have to work with these assholes? I'd rather put my efforts into Giselle. I am her only contact, after all."

Melcher pressed his lips together. I couldn't tell whether he was thinking or curbing his anger. Finally he spoke. "Complete this mission successfully, and I will take you off all other assignments until Dante is back."

My heart surged. I felt hopeful and deflated all at once. Melcher had promised what I wanted most—no more missions, no more assignments until Dante was safe. But he also said I had to go back to the lodge first.

I could do it. I didn't like it, but that didn't mean I wasn't capable.

"Okay," I said, lifting my chin. "I will go back one last time."

Melcher nodded. "You are a defender of humanity, Aurora; a champion and a guardian angel. Never forget how important your work is."

On opposite sides of me, Levi and Mason nodded solemnly. Did these guys really buy into Melcher's bullshit or, like Valerie, were they simply playing along? If so, they all had me beat in the acting department. I had a hard time not gagging.

"Thanks," I said, the "s" hissing between my teeth. "But the next tasting isn't until Friday, and I'd like to look for Dante in the meantime."

Melcher lowered his chin. "I'm afraid there's nothing we can do until Jared gets to town."

"And when will that be?"

Oh, goodie. Jared back in Anchorage. His arrival was a necessary evil, but one I dreaded nevertheless.

Melcher straightened. "As soon as possible. In the meantime, I suggest you go to class. That's what you wanted, isn't it? To be a college student?"

Yeah, like I was really going to be able to concentrate in class while Giselle held Dante hostage. I stared at Melcher a moment, looking for some sign of compassion. I saw nothing. His eyes were as empty as Giselle's.

Rather than answer Melcher's question, I asked, "Do you have a spare key to Dante's place?"

"Why would you need a key?" Melcher asked.

"So I can get his dog."

Parallel lines formed beside Melcher's chin when he frowned. "I warned Dante against keeping a pet. Our work doesn't allow for their care and upkeep," he said. Melcher drummed his fingers over his desk slowly. He stopped, got up, and went over to a square metal cabinet attached to the wall. He pulled a key out of his pocket and unlocked the cabinet. From behind him, I could see rows of keys hanging from labeled key chains. A sick sensation twisted in my gut knowing that Melcher could get inside my house at any time. And why shouldn't he? He owned the house. He owned us.

My gut churned.

Melcher pulled a key out and relocked the cabinet. Before returning to his desk, he stopped in front of the ancient file cabinet.

The room was silent, other than the metallic groan the drawer made as Melcher opened and closed it. He returned to his desk with the key and a file.

Melcher looked at Levi. "Mr. Parker, take care of the animal."

"Consider it done."

A jolt shot straight up my spine as Melcher's words registered. "What? No!"

Levi stepped forward, stretching his palm out for the key. I tried to intercept him, but Levi grabbed the key before I could stop him. He lifted it in the air, grinning like this was some kind of game.

"Don't worry," he said. "I'll make sure the dog finds a loving home." He looked over my shoulder and smirked, sharing a laugh with his partner.

"Tommy already has a loving home, you fuckwit," I said, jumping for the key.

Levi held it higher, grinning wider. I pulled my arm back and socked him in the chest with everything I had, anger adding extra "pow" to my punch.

Levi's smile dropped, but the key didn't.

"Agent Sky, get ahold of yourself!" Melcher roared.

I caught Mason out of the corner of my eye inching in behind me.

Three brutes against one woman. Even if I got lucky, got the key, and got past the guys, I'd never make it out of the building, let alone off base.

I took a shaky breath.

"I'll poison as many vampires as you want. I'll kill them all, just give me the key."

I implored Melcher with my eyes. He stared into them absently for several seconds before shaking his head. "You don't have time to take care of a pet."

"I'll find someone to watch him."

Again, a shake of the head.

"You have far more important things to worry about than a dog."

Melcher said "dog" like it was the lowest of all creatures, worse than vampires.

Melcher looked at Levi. “You are dismissed, Mr. Parker. I want a word with my hunters.”

Levi gave an obedient head nod and headed for the door. I got in front of him so fast he bumped into me. Levi shook his head slightly.

“Know when to accept defeat,” he said.

I thought I saw a flicker of pity on his face. I’d take what I could get. I leaned into Levi and placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. His eyes dropped to the spot where I touched him. From there they moved to my lips.

“Promise me you’ll do the right thing,” I said in a whisper. “Promise me you won’t hurt Tommy. Promise me—”

Before I could finish the next sentence, Levi silenced me with his finger. He pressed his pointer against my lips, leaned forward, and whispered in my ear, “And what do you promise in return?”

A sick sensation rolled over me. I didn’t know whether to throw up, slap him, or promise whatever he wanted so long as he kept Tommy safe.

“Enough,” Melcher said, before I could respond in any of the above ways. “This is not a negotiation.”

Levi removed his finger from my lips, straightened, and smiled. “Don’t worry. The dog will be better off now.” Levi slipped out the door. When it shut, it felt like a physical weight slamming over my heart.

Hatred coursed through my body when I glared at Melcher.

“I know you’re upset,” he said. “But you have to think of the greater good. People are counting on you, Aurora. They’re counting on all of us to keep them safe.”

I couldn’t care less about people at the moment. Humanity could go fuck itself, right after Agent Melcher. I fixated on his desk and had a brief fantasy in which I shoved it backward and crushed him against the wall.

“Now let’s get back to the problems at hand,” Melcher said. He took the file from his desk and handed it to Mason. “Henry Fisher has been giving Aurora problems. I want you to bring him in. Alive,” Melcher added. “Since Mr. Fisher is already aware of our operation, we can put him to immediate use during our agency’s next initiation.”

My heart flipped as Melcher’s intentions sunk in.

“You’re going to put him in a cell and make a new recruit kill him,” I said, staring absently at the bare walls.

“That’s correct,” Melcher said. “This way Mr. Fisher’s existence won’t be an entire waste. I find it poetic when one of the damned has an opportunity to do something good before they die.”

Sick. I always knew Melcher was twisted, but he still found ways to sicken me more. I was no friend of Henry’s, but there was nothing remotely poetic about putting him in a cage for some poor recruit to kill.

“That’s all for now,” Melcher said. “Mr. Hicks, please drive Miss Sky home.”

I didn’t bother beseeching Melcher one last time. I couldn’t even look at

him. I walked out of the office in front of Mason. Once outside, I said, "Before we go, I have to use the ladies room."

"Whatever," he said.

I strode over to the secretary's desk. A young woman wearing a camo top and pants looked up at me.

"Where's the bathroom?" I asked.

She pointed down the hall. "Take the first left. You'll see it on the right side of the hallway."

"Thanks."

I forced myself not to run. Once I'd rounded the corner, I dove into the bathroom and checked under the stalls for beige boots. Thankfully, the room was empty. I whipped my phone out and called Noel.

The more it rang, the more my heart jammed up my throat. When Noel answered I breathed out in relief.

"Don't get mad at me," Noel said, before I could get a word in. "He insisted on staying the night."

I experienced a moment's confusion before realizing she was referring to Fane. That was the least of my worries.

"I don't care about that! I need your help now."

Noel's voice dropped. "Aurora, what's wrong?"

I caught a glimpse of myself in the wide mirror above the bathroom sinks. I looked crazy eyed, face flushed and splotchy. My distressed features matched the tone of my voice.

"I don't have time to explain. You need to get over to Dante's house now and get his dog out of there."

"What's going on? Where are you?"

"I told you I don't have time to explain," I said, right before proceeding to do just that. "I'm on base. There's an informant on his way right now to get Tommy and do who knows what with him."

"Aurora…"

"What?"

Noel exhaled. "I'm in Girdwood."

My heart dropped. Girdwood was roughly forty-five minutes away. There was no possible way for Noel to beat Levi to Dante's.

I caught my eye in the mirror. I stared back in determination.

"Call Fane," I said. "Call anyone. I have to go, another hunter is waiting to take me home."

I hung up before Noel could answer. She better find someone. She owed me.

I'd never missed Dante as much as I did sitting in Mason's Hummer on the ride home. Mason wasn't the talkative type. I wasn't in the mood for

conversation, anyway, but it would have helped to know the big guy possessed emotions of any kind.

Dante, where are you? My head screamed as I stared out the window.

"Is this it?" Mason asked, speaking his first words of the entire drive when he slowed in front of my house.

"Yes," I said, voice lifting when I saw the familiar Roadster from the previous night in the driveway.

Relief flooded over me. Noel had come through. One of her gothic boy toys had made it in time. It was the first small victory of the day.

"Who's that?" Mason asked, staring at the car.

"None of your damn business," I said. I stepped out of the car, grateful to get away from Mason and find Tommy safe from Levi's clutches.

I walked up the driveway, listening for Mason's rig to pull away. When it didn't, I looked over my shoulder and glared at him. He watched me with a steady gaze, lips relaxed into a neutral line. This reminded me of being stalked by a vampire. Vampires, assassins, informants—I was beginning to hate them all equally.

Tommy wasn't inside the car. I stopped at the driver's door and tapped lightly on the window.

Daren, the shorter of the Goth guys with the eyebrow piercing opened his door. A square bandage covered the spot on his neck where I'd seen the bloody bite mark the week before.

"I drove over as soon as Noel called," Daren said.

"Shh," I said, even though Mason couldn't hear us.

"Just walk inside with me like everything's cool."

Daren quickly closed his mouth and followed me to the front door.

My feet felt as if they were moving in slow motion. I wanted to run, but I couldn't, not with Mason watching.

Daren and I moved forward, a foot apart, until we reached the door. I unlocked the deadbolt, re-locking it once we were inside. No more unannounced visitors bursting in, thank you very much.

I listened at the door until I heard the Hummer drive away. Mason had gone, probably after Henry now.

I turned to Daren. "Tell me you got Tommy."

I didn't like the frown on Daren's lips.

"I went to the address Noel gave me, but there was no dog there."

"How do you know?" I asked. "Did you go inside?"

Daren nodded. "The door was open. I went in and searched the whole house."

I stared at Daren for several seconds, hoping I'd heard wrong. He needed to revise his story, tell me what I wanted to hear. I refused to accept this outcome. It didn't work. It wasn't acceptable.

I collapsed against Daren, nearly knocking him down. He grasped me by the shoulders, fumbling for a better hold.

"Are you okay?" he asked in alarm.

I took a steadying breath as I righted myself. No, I wasn't okay. I was far from okay.

"I haven't had anything to eat or drink in nearly twenty-four hours," I said.

I stared at Daren's pale arms. He still had a hold on my shoulders. When he saw me staring, he let go. I could make out the blue ridge of his veins on his knuckles. They looked precariously close to the surface of his skin.

"What happened here?" I asked, poking the bandage on his neck.

Daren's hand shot up to the bandage as soon as I pulled my finger back. "It's nothing," he said quickly.

"You like getting bit," I said in a far-off voice.

My eyes kept gravitating to his neck.

"Don't you?" Daren asked. "You know, when you and Fane were together?"

I moved my head slowly from side to side. His neck shifted back and forth as I did.

I didn't like being bitten. I didn't like having my blood sucked. I wanted to do the sucking. That was part of what it took to hack a life as a vampire. I knew I liked blood, but biting had never thrilled me until now.

God, I was famished.

I ripped the bandage from Daren's neck, experiencing a sudden craze. Hunger pains gripped me by the waist. Saliva gathered inside my mouth. I was stressed, starved, and angry—not a good combination… at least not for Daren.

The raw wound beckoned to me. It would be so easy to reopen it. This time, I grabbed Daren's shoulders. I yanked him to me, fueled by the promise of bloody nourishment. It had revived me once; it could revive me again.

I went at the bite mark as though aiming for a bull's-eye.

I reopened the wound with my teeth. Daren yelped. Blood trickled over the surface of his skin. I sucked at it greedily.

I didn't stop to think I was drinking directly from the source, just like a vampire.

Daren's body slackened. He closed his eyes, lower lip slightly ajar.

He likes this, I told myself to try and justify what I was doing.

I bit into the wound to make it bleed more. Daren made a guttural sound in the back of his throat. He moaned.

Sick freak, I thought, even though I was the one drinking him. I wanted the blood. I needed the blood.

Still, it wasn't right.

I swallowed and pushed Daren away. He steadied himself. I grabbed the torn bandage from the ground, thrusting it at him.

"Cover that up."

Daren took the bandage from my fingers and held it over his neck. "It's

okay," he assured me. "Your secret's safe with me. Just ask Noel."

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. "What secret?"

Daren leaned in, looking side to side as though the walls were listening.

"That you're vampires," he whispered.

"We're not vampires," I said.

"But…"

"No!" I inhaled sharply. "You should go now."

"Of course. Whatever you want," Daren said. He paused at the door. "If you ever need anything, call me."

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19
Worst Day Ever

I sank onto a dining room chair. Despite the blood, I felt like the one who'd been drained.

Giselle still had Dante. Levi had Tommy. Jared was on his way to Anchorage.

And I was a vampire.

I didn't need Goth-boy to tell me what I'd known and denied since the moment I first drank blood.

There was no antidote. I'd been dead all along.

What Melcher called side effects were really symptoms, ones I recognized in the boot camp textbook: loss of appetite, sensitivity to sun, blood cravings, lethargy followed by bouts of hyper-activity and energy, even sensitivity to garlic.

We'd all found that last one especially amusing at boot camp.

Vampires infected with rabies were hypersensitive to pungent smells, like garlic. Guess what the cafeteria never served? Garlic, onions, or anything else from the genus allium.

Even Dante, with his impressive appetite, ordered his pizza without garlic. I'd seen him pick onions off burgers before.

So it was true. Melcher was building his own vampire army—fighting fire with fire. It had to be.

What happened when his soldiers figured it out? What options did we have? Serve Melcher for the remainder of our unnatural lives or die?

My lips curled back. It brought a whole new meaning to the term "life sentence."

What about death? It was pretty comical considering I'd already died and been brought back as this. I stretched my arms across the table. Vampire arms. I concentrated on my breathing. It sounded the same as it always did. I placed a hand over my heart, felt the soft, measured thumps.

Everything inside my body felt the same, but was functioning differently. I was immortal… at least until Melcher ordered my damned soul be sent to the great beyond.

I laughed hysterically, peals of laughter that went on and on, bouncing off the walls all around me.

Undead. Dead.

What was the bloody point?

The doorbell rang. I wiped tears from my eyes as I got up to answer it.

Fane stood on the other side of the door, frowning.

"Noel called…" he stopped abruptly, leaned forward and looked into my

face. “You seem strange.”

I raised both brows. “You mean not quite human?”

“What do you mean?”

I had a bone to pick with Fane. He’d let me go on about the antidote and turning, all the while knowing I was already undead. Now would be a good time to speak up. I waited for Fane to call me the V word—to say it out loud. But he remained silent. We stared at one another, each of us waiting. Maybe he wanted me to say it.

I had a more pressing question to ask. “Did you get Tommy?”

I rose to the balls of my feet, ready to hug him if only he’d say he came through.

I didn’t want to deal with being undead. I just wanted to run my fingers over Tommy’s soft fur and revel in the fact that Levi hadn’t gotten to him first. After that, I’d handle everything else.

The frown on Fane’s lips froze me in place. “He wasn’t there.”

My heart slowly sank.

“No,” I whispered, tears pooling over my eyes. Not Tommy. I couldn’t let them take him while Dante was held hostage.

I leveled my eyes with Fane’s. “We have to find him.”

Fane stared back at me, and in his eyes I saw the sympathy and kindness I so desperately craved.

“I’d say the pound is the best place to look,” Fane said.

I nodded. “I think so, too.”

“Let’s go.”

Fane drove us to Animal Control in silence. No music, no conversation. He walked by my side past cages, cell after cell of forlorn eyes that followed our movement—some begging, others that had lost all hope. There were three golden retrievers, none of them Tommy Moe, named after the great Olympic gold and silver medalist and resident of Alaska at the time he became the first American male skier to win two medals in a single Winter Games.

Come on, Champ. Where are you? Where did you go?

My throat closed up. The simple act of breathing threatened to choke me.

Fane sat on the edge of his car’s hood in the pound’s parking lot, calling every animal rescue group in Anchorage to ask if anyone had turned in a golden retriever that day. But like Dante, Tommy was MIA, and there wasn’t a thing I could do about it.

“I’ll keep calling,” Fane said on the drive home. “Every day until we find

him."

The tears I'd just blinked away swarmed back over my eyes. "For all we know, Levi took him out of town and set him loose in the woods," I said, staring out the window.

That sounded like something Levi would do. I remembered the way he taunted me, his mischievous smile, the last question he whispered in my ear: "What do you promise in return?"

Maybe, like Giselle, he decided to keep Tommy hostage in return for something else. Now was not the time to come up with ideas. They only made my skin crawl. But if he kept Tommy, that meant he wasn't lost in the woods without food or shelter.

"How long have you known this informant who took the dog?" Fane asked.

"I met him today," I said, frowning.

Fane's slender fingers wrapped around the steering wheel. "And this was after Giselle stopped by and stabbed Valerie?"

I took a deep breath in and out. "It's been a long day."

It hadn't just been a long day, it had been the worst day of my life. Right after initiation. And my abduction and stabbing. And being duct-taped, suspended from a ceiling, and forced to kill Marcus. Come to think of it, all I had were bad days. To say it was the worst wasn't saying much. It was like calling ice cold.

By the time we returned home, Noel's convertible was parked in the driveway. When I saw it, I went from mopey to mad. If Noel hadn't left me alone with Fane overnight and gone off to Girdwood, she could have easily gotten to Dante's house before Levi. We lived minutes away, as opposed to Fane who lived clear across town.

Fane pulled up along the curb.

Once we'd made it inside, Noel rushed at us from the hallway. She was wearing a short strappy dress with light pink and purple checkers. The fabric reminded me of a picnic blanket. Around her neck, she wore a chunky necklace with smooth square beads. Noel's shoulders and arms were bare and perfectly smooth. I couldn't make out any bite marks, but there wouldn't be any, would there? Not with her doing the biting.

"I got here as fast as I could," she said.

After she did her hair and makeup and got dressed? I thought bitterly.

Noel turned to Fane. "Did you get the dog?"

Fane shook his head. "The informant got there before me."

Noel covered her mouth. "Oh, no."

"Why did you leave me alone with Fane last night?" I asked.

Noel lowered her hand slowly. "A friend invited me to a party. Besides, I thought it would be better if we weren't all three under the same roof. You told me to stay out of the way, so that's what I've done. I have no idea what's

going on with you. You haven't exactly been forthcoming."

"And you have?" I challenged. "How long have you known you were a vampire?"

Noel gasped and looked at Fane. "So you did tell her?"

Fane didn't say anything. He looked at me, instead. He'd known what I was from the moment he caught me trying to sneak blood out of his fridge. He knew about Noel. He probably figured it out at Marcus' party. That was the big secret. That was what they'd hidden from me, as though I were some kind of china doll who'd crack under the pressure.

I wasn't fragile, I was numb. Nothing could hurt me at the moment. I had no feelings—physical or emotional—to hurt. What was there left to lose besides my life?

If Giselle wanted to play it cool, I'd be cool back. If Melcher wanted to keep secrets, I'd keep secrets, too. They were all toying with me, and I was tired of it. I had to start thinking like a vampire, cold and calculated, just like the bastards messing with my life and the people I loved.

"Fane didn't tell me; Daren did," I said.

Noel's jaw dropped further. "Daren wouldn't do that," she said.

I tilted my head, brows rising suggestively. "Oh, but he would under the right circumstances."

Noel frowned and shook her head, not understanding.

"Aurora bit him," Fane supplied.

He was a quick one, Fane Donado. Always had been. Just not quick enough to save Tommy.

Noel's eyes widened. "You bit him?"

I placed a hand on my hip. "That's what vampires do, isn't it?"

Noel let out a breath that sounded like relief. "How long have you known?" she asked.

I stared at the walls absently, thinking back.

"I knew something wasn't right the moment I woke up from the accident," I said.

I knew the first time I drank blood. I knew when Marcus told me I tasted like death. I knew at camp. I knew in so many little ways, but it wasn't until I ripped the band-aid off and bit Daren that I knew for sure.

Drinking blood wasn't just a craving, it was instinct.

"What about you?" I asked Noel.

She glanced at Fane.

"Fane confirmed it for me the night you walked in on us at the palace."

"You were telling the truth," I said, looking into Fane's steady brown eyes. "Our blood has a bad taste. Marcus mentioned it before I killed him." I looked at Noel. "Is everyone in our unit a vampire? Dante? Valerie?" Levi and Mason. It wouldn't surprise me if those two already knew.

Noel nodded. "I think so."

Valerie I could believe, but the idea of Dante being a vampire sounded

ludicrous. But he had the same blood. He'd undergone the same transfusion, been injected with vampire viruses. We were all undead. The process had been completed, thanks to Melcher and his team of mad scientists.

A trickle of hope fluttered through me. If Dante really was a vampire, maybe Giselle would let him go. Why hold another vampire hostage?

"We can get Giselle to release Dante," I said.

Fane shook his head. "She won't care if he's a vampire."

"So now what?" I asked sullenly.

Fane looked from Noel to me.

"We work together," he said.

I thought telling Fane and Noel everything that had happened to me since Fane left that morning would lessen the weight on my shoulders, but it didn't. Dante was still a captive, Valerie was still in critical condition, Giselle's demands were still impossible to meet, and Tommy was nowhere to be found.

Noel had asked about the blood on the carpet. I hoped she was as good at getting blood stains out as she was at home decorating.

The three of us stood in the living room where I'd walked them through everything from the confrontation with Giselle, to the meeting on base, my new teammates, and our upcoming assignment.

"What would happen if you walked away?" Fane asked.

A bitter laugh bubbled its way up my throat. "I can't walk away. Melcher would put me on a hit list, or worse, throw me in one of his cells for a new recruit to kill."

I had no trouble imagining all types of horrific scenarios when it came to Melcher.

The room went quiet until Fane said, "Unless, as we discussed earlier, Melcher was eliminated."

"What about Noel?" I asked. "She loves her work as an informant with the agency."

Even if she was a vampire, she obviously enjoyed the perks of staying on the force: a nice house, clothes, and a convertible. Both a government slave and a kept vampire.

Noel cleared her throat. "I want out."

I must have heard wrong. Noel Harper lived to serve. She once told me we were like the vampire police, recruited to keep order in the world. She said she loved doing her part.

"Does Melcher know about your self-discovery?" I asked.

Noel shook her head.

"What's with the convertible?"

Noel grinned. "I parked my old beater in Fairview and reported it stolen. Melcher told me to find something under ten thousand on Craigslist. I found a

Mazda with low miles in mint condition after you left. It was easy to talk the owner down with it being winter."

I glanced around the room.

"This is a nice house. You've got a nice car, suck buddies on the side…" I looked directly at Noel. "Why would you want to give that all up?"

Noel met my eye. Her head lifted. "Because Melcher broke the rules. We're supposed to save lives, not take them."

"He killed you, too," I said, voice dropping.

I wondered if he'd set Jared on Noel, as well. Just how many lives had they taken in the interest of their underworld war?

Noel shook her head. "I killed myself."

"You killed yourself," I repeated, dumbstruck.

"It doesn't matter. He might not have taken my life away, but he's taking others. How long before he ends us for good?"

"I've been wondering the same thing," I said.

Fane cleared his throat. "You said this vampire named Jared hit your car?"

"Yes."

Fane balled his hand into a fist. "In that case, he's the first to go."

"He's on his way to Anchorage," I said. "Melcher called him in to go after Giselle. She wants him alive."

"Too bad," Fane said. "Jared's mine."

"You can't kill him," I said. "We have to get Dante back first. I won't do anything that risks his life."

Fane pressed his lips together. He stared at me steadily, frowning.

"I agree," Noel spoke up. "We get Dante. He's one of the good guys. And Gavin… we get him back, too."

"Very well," Fane said. "What's the plan?"

I smiled grimly.

"We let Jared come to us."

Fire against fire. Fang to fang. I'd handle Jared the way I'd been taught—without mercy. Melcher wanted to keep the kings in play. I had my own plans to take them all out one by one until only the master remained, vulnerable and weak.

I didn't have my own army. I had something better. Friends. The kind that lasted forever.

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